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The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam

A mosque of their own

MARIA JASCHOK AND SHUI JINGJUN

THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S MOSQUES IN CHINESE ISLAM

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and
Shui Jingjun

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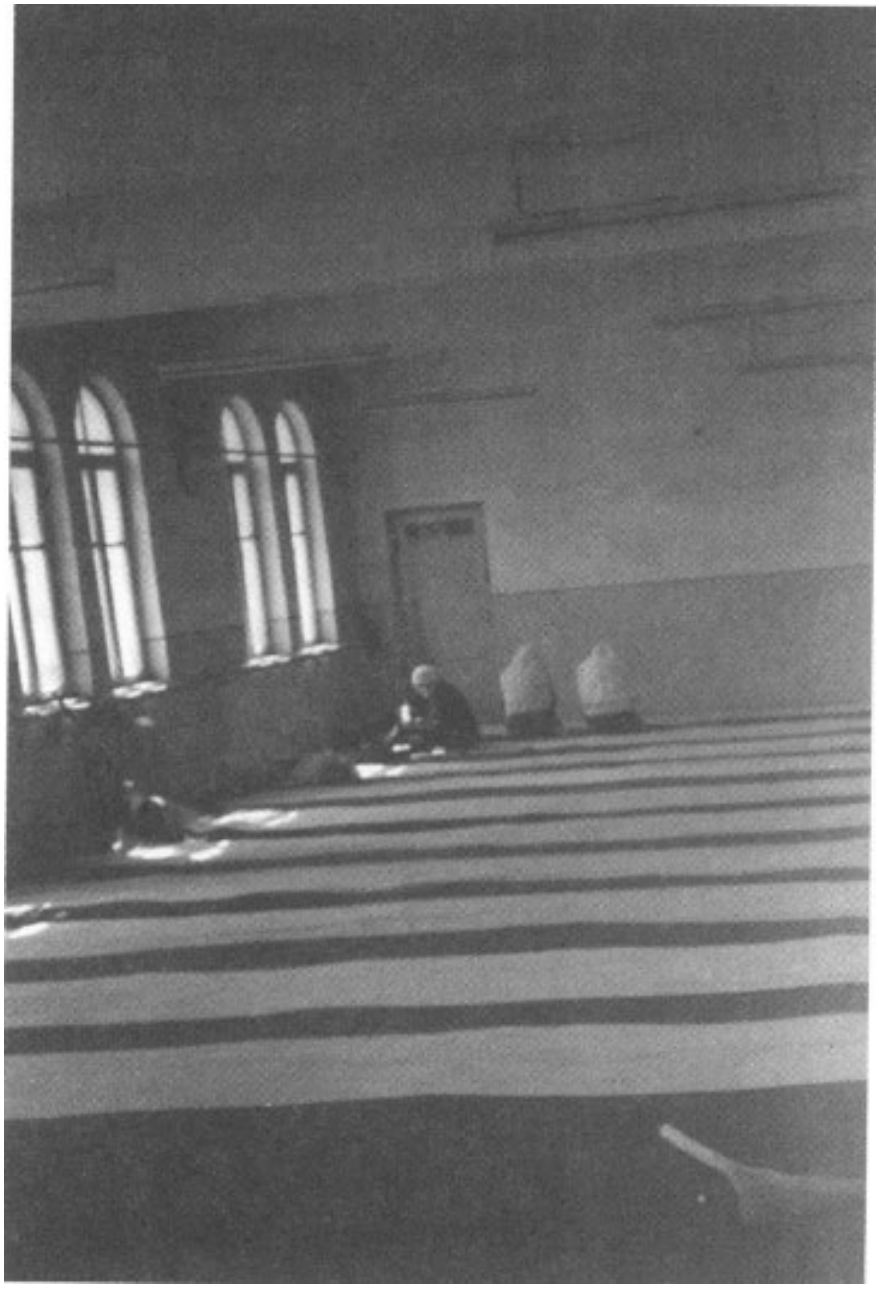
Dedication

For our mothers, Hildegard Jaschok and Sbao Ximei
For our sisters, Hap Bryant and Yang Dongling



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Division of Labour

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Abbreviations

ACHA	All-China *Huijiao* (Islamic) Association
ACWF	All-China Women's Federation
HIY	Muslim Emergency Refuge
NPC	National People's Congress

MAP 1: Distribution of the Hui population (8,602,978), according to the 1989/90 census, by provinces and

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Collective Preface

SHUI JINGJUN (co-author): In October *1996,* Zhu Li and I went to Zhoukou, a well-known Muslim community to conduct an investigation for the project. Observing my interaction with Muslim informants, Zhu Li exclaimed that 'you are really a downright Muslim'. Yes, I cannot deny this. My career, the choice of research projects and my ordained fate are all decided by my origin in a unique culture as well as by several other relevant factors. As a researcher, I take great academic interest in observing, understanding, analysing and thinking about the culture of the Hui nationality to which I belong. As a member of this community, I cannot help taking an interest in its fate so as to understand it with all my heart. I know well of the hardships this ethnic group has experienced in its search for a livelihood. I am sincerely happy to observe its progress, but I am also saddened by enduring problems and backwardness. I hope for speedy development and am willing to work hard for its realisation. As a woman, I take an interest in research projects involving women (which is how I came to know Maria Jaschok). But what is more, as a woman I have come to grapple with feelings of ambivalence.

I was born into a Hui family of many generations of traditional medical practitioners in South Henan (Nanyang). Exposed to frequent contact with a non-Islamic environment, my grandfather and other members of his generation had only vague ideas about religion. My father and his cousins studied in modern secular schools and received even less influence from Islam and Islamic culture. Although female members in the family (for instance, my grandmother and women of her generation) are very pious and never waver in their religious convictions, their influence on the men and children in the family has been very limited. The original extended family disintegrated long before I was born. Brought up by a father who received modern education and by a mother little influenced by Islam, I knew almost nothing about Islam and Hui culture except that because of the fact of my birth I must observe the taboo on eating pork. Modern education and the influence of a traditional Han Chinese culture estranged me from my Hui heritage. I was eager to enter a world where I would find a life with greater freedom. Perhaps it is true that everything is ordained. Gradually, I began to develop a liking for research into my own cultural

background just as it happened to other Hui intellectuals. The sensitivity I have felt to my identity as both a researcher and woman made me explore at greater depth the world of *qingzhen nusi* (women's mosques) and *nu ahong*. But no sooner than I decided to 'return', I felt the urge to escape. My mind is torn by a conflict more complicated than the one described by Qian Zhongshu in his famous novel *Weicheng* (A Fortress Besieged). To me, it is not simply a matter of getting in or out of the fortress. Born in a fortress, I have never really been out of it, and yet it is hard for me to get perfectly settled in it. It seems that I have been divided up into different parts: some are kept inside while others are left outside. Those outside mean to get in, while those inside yearn to get out. None is to enter or escape completely. Perhaps this is an inborn cultural contradiction that can never be erased or settled. However, this conflict over the desire to escape and desire to return has never stopped me. Driven by strong academic thirst and by some inexplicable emotions, I never give up.

To observe history and social reality from the perspective of a woman has enabled me to have a better understanding of Hui Muslim women, the Chinese Islamic culture, and the value and significance of Women's Studies. I am also glad that I have made friends with a foreign woman whose heart is linked with mine. Muslims who know us say that it is *zhenzhu* (Allah) who arranged that I should come to know Maria Jaschok. I belief that it is true.

WANG YUFEN (contributor): I am a Han by origin and have been engaged in legal research at the Henan Academy of Social Sciences. As a woman, I naturally take great interest in all issues concerning women's rights and position in society.

However, it is the unique situation of Chinese Muslim women which attracted my attention and led to this study of their place in marriage and family. Their dual identity (Chinese and Muslim) accounts for their difference from other social groups. What is the situation of their rights and responsibilities now? Which are the points of divergence from Han women's rights? These questions attracted my attention.

As I knew very little about my research subject and few sources could be identified, I spent most of my time interviewing Muslim women and listening to their accounts. I have thus been able to explore the transformation Muslim women's rights and position in marriage and family have undergone in the twentieth century: the relationship between women's rights and the patriarchal system, and the impact of traditional Chinese law, Islamic law and modern family law on the changing lives of Muslim women. My chapter is based on generous information supplied through many interviews by *nu ahong,* female

hailifan (students of the Koran), and *nu xianglao* (female worshippers).

ZHU LI (contributor): When I was young, I knew that my *Hui* neighbours did not eat pork, and that they would go and ask the *ahong* to do the killing of animals for them in the mosque for their festivals and celebrations. During my days at university, I read some books on Islam. But it was in Mali that I first experienced what influence Islam has had on the believers' way of life.

I had the honour of working with Muslims in Mali for seven months, from 1988 to 1989. There I watched them at worship, heard their chanting of the Koran, and participated in their celebrations. When I returned to China, I tried to find out more about Muslims in China. But as a Han I dared not to enter a mosque, for I knew it to be the sacred place of the believers. I was afraid that as an unbelieving outsider I would be driven out by annoyed Muslims if I tried to walk in.

Shui Jingjun, one of my best friends, is of Hui Muslim origin, and has been engaged in the research of Hui history these last years. I often heard her talk about her research and research findings. In 1995, when she and Maria Jaschok started a collaborative research project on Chinese Muslim women, they invited me to join in their research, and to study the economic management of *nusi*, women's mosques. Coming from an academic background in economics, I was happy to contribute and at the same time have opportunity to deepen my understanding of Hui Muslims through a project jointly with good friends. After visiting nearly forty mosques in over a year's time, I have come to feel the presence of Islam in our cities in a most personal way. Whenever I hear the *bangke* calling people to worship, an indescribable feeling wells up in my heart. Interviews with numerous male and female *ahong*, *shetou* (mosque administrators), and *xianglao* (believers) have enabled me to understand their thinking and feelings better. At the same time, I see more clearly that I am indeed an atheist. But the two years of research have enabled me to become fully aware of the reality of a Chinese culture which is truly multi-cultural.

MARIA JASCHOK (co-author/editor): My strongest sentiments are a sense of gratitude (at opportunities granted), joy (at the women and men I met and came to understand more deeply), responsibility (towards the many informants and my colleagues and friends in the project) and awe, as well as anticipation, when I ponder what there is still to learn and explore once this book is completed. Collaboration extended into the most personal dimensions of our relationships. During my time in China I lived in the home of my collaborator, and she became a friend and challenging partner in endless conversations which arose from our

work together, but extended beyond work-related issues and problems to our persons. For example, the religious faith we might have confronted that day in long interviews with Muslim believers would become a question between the two of us. The personal stance and viewpoint thus enunciated would then in turn be treated as a subject for discussion of subjectivity in our interests and approaches. Not only have I taken away with me immense personal profit from this constant dialectical exchange which occurred between Shui Jingjun and me, but also as an academic I have been pushed up a steep learning curve over the impact of situated identity – ethnical, religious and gender – on intellectual conditions of production, aspirations, and the community of interpretations of which an academic from a so-called religio-ethnic minority is a member.

The generosity which enabled me to share for many months (between 1994 and 1997) my Chinese colleagues' memories, reminiscences, assessments and projections, their work but also their private lives, their dreams and their despair, made this project more than a collaboration on a joint investigation, it made it an experience which profoundly changed, and still continues to change, all of us who participated in the work on which this book is based. I became also aware of the extent to which contradictions and tensions which exist in Chinese political and cultural spheres, some beginning to be enunciated others still taboo, are played out in the constraints, limitations and challenges which shape the projects of Chinese intellectual production.

Note

In line with Chinese convention, Chinese surname precedes given name, and name precedes title.

The Glossary only lists and elaborates on those *pinyin* terms in the text which are of direct relevance to the religious and political culture of Chinese Hui Muslim women.

Part I

Introduction

Chapter I

A Mosque Of Their Own: Muslim Women, Chinese Islam and Sexual Equality

'*For Our Muslim Sisters*'

It is not as if we know of no quest, no ideals;
we are like many others yearning for the daily sun,
in our dreams fulfilling our most beautiful aspirations
only because of the prejudices of this world,
must we confine ourselves to the kitchen, idling away the sunlight?
ah, Muslim sisters –
when today, the surging tides of the reform
are pressing on the shores of our motherland,
and our fellow believers so as to promote the cause of their people
are at work day and night,
How can we
confine ourselves to the closed courtyards?
may the eyes of the world
stare us into faltering,
but for Islam
we must go forth to meet the movements of change,
ah, Muslim sisters –
let us go out of this door to purify ourselves in the light of sun,
release our life-energies,
give our existence still greater meaning,
and our life, splendour.
Sisters, let us walk arm-in-arm! (Lu & Wang, 1993)

Lu Jiye and Wang Hailan, writers of the poem which appeared in *Minzu Yilin* (a magazine devoted to ethnic minorities' arts and literature), address their 'sisters' as Muslims, as active participants in current reforms, and as Chinese women. They call upon them to brave prejudices and cross the domestic threshold separating them from realisation of cherished aspirations. Islamic rites of purification fuse with Maoist calls to emancipate women from fetters of patriarchy, creating a potent imagery of liberating sun light with the power to purify and release energies that are life itself. Women are implored to extend

their site of activity beyond the home, making the world their own: for Islam, for the cause of reform. The site of change must be the world itself: women's visibility in social spaces outside family homes; women's yearning for life beyond confinement; women's capacity for subjective intervention in times of political, economic and social changes to create opportunities of transformative potential for themselves; women's relationship with their fellow believers in pursuit of a common cause, Islam; – this remarkable poem foreshadows some of the most important themes in our book.

We ask how unique and controversial innovations in organised Islam in China led to the historical emergence of *qingzhen nusi* (abbreviated: *nusi*, women's mosque) and the institution of *nu ahong* (female religious leader, often presiding over a *nusi*, with ritual, educational, social and political functions); we ask about initiators, initiatives, place and time of innovations (see Chapters II, III, IV), the structural and historical factors of its evolution. But also we ask what happened when Muslim women took over space situated outside their designated feminine sphere which was intended for their education and which became in the course of time a site of religious and social activities over which women had, and have, various degrees of control and influence, in various degrees of dependence on, and independence from, men's mosques (see in particular Chapter VII). In foregrounding women-centred viewpoints, the concept of *nusi* widens to encompass meanings beyond a social space allocated to female Muslims to acquire religious learning and ritual mastery, to perform ablutions and pray collectively under the guidance of their own *ahong*: that is, the religious values and spiritual meanings invested in the site of prayer which reveal the subjective imprints of different generations of worshippers and religious leaders. The mosque understood as 'a perspective' originated in and turned towards the divine (Fatima Mernissi, 1996) symbolises the dynamics of an institution which straddles historical contingency and an unending quest for eternal truth, which is sustained by faith in creation ordained by God, on the one hand, and yet, on the other hand, when it comes to institutionalised religion and religious praxis, is subject to situated interests and contested claims of authenticity which engender their own dialectics: oppositional, interventionist agency as alternative and challenging re/interpretation of the divine will.

In speaking of women's perception of the past, Fentress and Wickham identify the most essential problem as being 'hegemony: that of a dominant ideology and a dominance over narration, as expressed through the male-female relationship' (1992:138). The relationship between the specific 'hegemony' which characterises relations between men and women in Chinese Islam, and its interfacing with the sexual asymmetry characteristic of Confucian culture, and

how it effects women's memory, raises questions of appropriate methodology (see Chapters XI, VIII). In writing about history, we must write about silence, devising ways of recovering the past 'on the basis of documents and the absence of documents,' Le Goff notes (1992:182).

But muted memory is not the same as inactivity, or lack of agency. Muslim women look back on a memory archive, even if overwritten and partial, of buildings, religious schools and women's mosques, many several generations old, under female religious leadership, which present a powerful visual documentation of challenge to the androcentrism of Islam (for interesting parallels in dearth of scholarship on medieval European nunneries, see Gilchrist, 1994). This evocative 'symbolic landscape' of Chinese Islam is inspiring some Muslim women intellectuals to formulate the beginning of their own unique Islamic tradition and indeed with an understanding of conditions of Muslim women elsewhere, a pride that uniquely allows Muslims in China to look back at a consistently strong female presence in Islamic organisation (foremost with her pioneering article, Shui, 1996; also, Jiang Bo & Wang Xingling, 1996).

This landscape of 'women's mosques' provided us, the researchers, with not only symbolic but also physical and social pointers to a greater understanding of how women engendered and sustained faith, aspiration and loyalties under often challenging conditions.

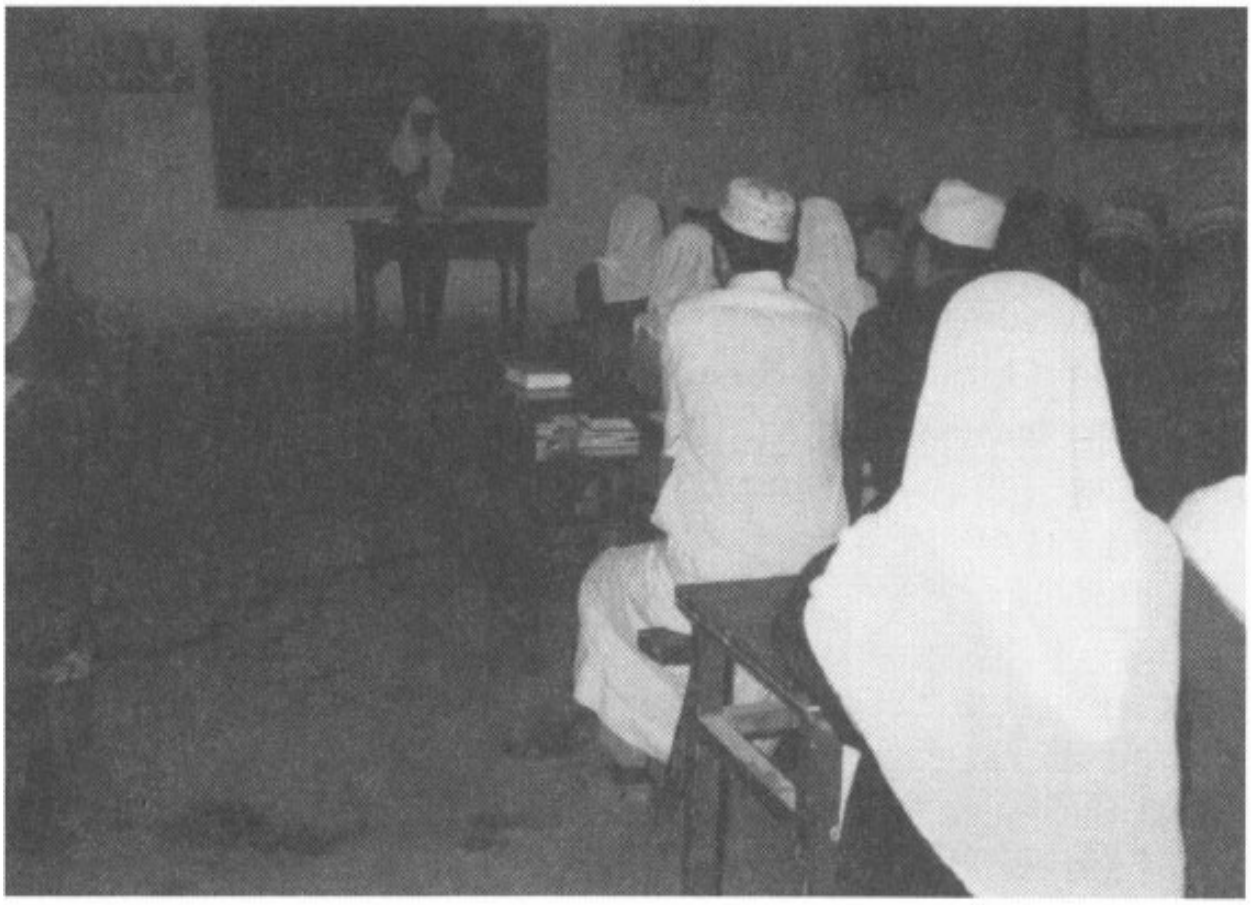


PLATE 2: A young female *hailifan* (student) lectures a mixed class on the topic of 'Obey and Respect Your Teacher'; at the Hexi Mosque, Zhoukou City, Henan Province. 10 October 1996 (Shui)

The Book: Researchers and Methodologies

Shui Jingjun had been asking questions about the origin of women's mosques since the late 1980s, investigations which culminated in the publication of an article in 1996 in *Huizu Yanjiu*. But due to lack of institutional and financial support the work was based on partial data and too small a sample of women's mosques to allow more than tentative conclusions. Maria Jaschok's interest in the situation of Muslim women had been sparked by an accidental discovery of *qingzhen nusi* (women's mosques) in Zhengzhou, Henan, in 1993. Han colleagues' indifference to religious women, lack of documentation, and an enduring interest in the lives of believing women in a secular society provoked further enquiries. On one of her early visits to a women's mosque in Zhengzhou, Guo *Ahong* (the resident spiritual leader, teacher and ritual specialist) refused, as she put it, to repeat herself, and thus brought two researchers together who had, unbeknown to each other, interviewed Guo *Ahong* on very similar concerns. It

was then, as appreciative informants were wont to say, through the intervention of Allah, that we met. We decided to collaborate.

The identity of participants is important to understanding the formulation of a project. We shape methodology, raise questions and interpret findings (see Eck and Devaki Jain for their discussion of such issues, 1986). The consequences for 'naming of issues' and cross-cultural translation became also apparent in our collaboration as we sought to translate across cultures and convictions of multi-faceted political, religious, and secular hues. Of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, of different nationalities, academic training, assumptions and institutional and political constraints – our differences not only complemented each other, enriching the collaboration for both of us, they also fuelled our dialogues which became a vital component of a work-style which enabled long and fruitful discussions and facilitated a close, and trusting, co-operation. Not always did we agree, but our disagreements proved creative and the grist for the conversational mill. Over time, boundaries which separate insider from outsider began to shift. The amount of time spent in Muslim households, in women's mosques, was an education in 'conformity', as Lila Abu-Lughod (1988) tells of her own process of integration into the community of Bedouin women in the process of which, by becoming more 'like' the community, she came to discover what the community's priorities are – and thus what they must become for the researcher.

Shared weeks of fieldtravel, constant dialogue, the joint confrontation of obstacles and crises, knitted the bonds between us more tightly, enabling us to be spontaneous to the point, on one memorable occasion, when we erupted into a rather public emotional disagreement, enabling us to be both mutually critical and affirming of each other. Insider/outsider divides realigned themselves when, towards the latter part, two young Han scholars were invited to join in the work. Wang Yufen and Zhu Li contributed their expertise in legal and economic history respectively to explore the place of Islamic law in the lives of Chinese Muslim women (Chapter VI) and to examine the internal administration and scope of authority of *nusi* in terms of degree of dependency on men's mosques (Chapter VII). Tension built up at times more difficult to resolve, because intrinsic to the way Han identity, in this case, unknowingly, tends to defined itself as an Othering of minority identity. These conflicts were a source of enlightening discussion and a sobering lesson for all on the precariousness of scholarly objectivity.

The time allowed by our three-year framework, our repeat visits to mosque communities, our correspondence with scholars and official cadres (not all were adversaries), enabled many Hui Muslim local historians to assist us, trace

informants or a piece of missing information, a document, a photograph – as it happened with Guo Chengmei, the son of a famous *ahong* family. Guo, a cadre working for the Jiaxing Branch of the China Islamic Association and a respected Hui historian, painstakingly reconstructed Yang Huizhen *Ahong*'s dramatic impact on the Jiaxing Muslim community during the 1940s to be included in our book (see below and Chapter XII). Two life testimonies were written by the women themselves: Yang Yinlian from Harbin gave us her work-report as *nu ahong* for inclusion, and Shui Zhiying from Nanyang in Henan recalled the impact of several generations of women in her husband's family on her own spiritual journey (Chapter XII).

Aware of the importance of decoding incongruities, tensions and frustrations in collaborative work for a constant re-examination of our respective *a priori* assumptions about research priorities, work-style and methodologies, we took on board Daniel Overmyer's warning in his state of the field article on the study of religion in China (1995), namely, that religious studies must inevitably entail Orientalist praxis (due to the dearth of pertinent Chinese scholarship). Our collaboration involved an important component by which conversations about our fieldwork incorporated also questions of the other's bias and of sources of disagreement over interpretations. Indeed, as Kamala Visweswaran puts it, 'questions of positionality more often confront female rather than male fieldworkers' in that feminist scholars are concerned as a matter of methodology with biases, silences and distortions in representations of culture, and their recognition of cultural interpretation as 'power laden' (1994:23). The vulnerability of local colleagues under constrained conditions of academic production was a factor which affected judgement of feasible (as opposed to desirable) ethnographic work and the moral choices to be made when foregoing a research site was to sacrifice valuable data to concerns for the project's (and at times, researchers') safety. A volatile context of fluctuating policies on ethnic and religious rights in China, often instant official responses to specific local events, made flexibility in research planning and willingness to alter schedules and intended list of informants an imperative. This constant wariness also served to minimise potential negative impact on the continuation of the project due to its frequent sudden politicisation, brought on by the presence of a Western researcher.

The collaborative nature of our project made us conscious of different audiences and different expectations as well as the different impact our publication was bound to have: with audiences ranging from the local Muslim community (a most attentive and at time interventionist audience) and orthodox imams to Western secular feminists and Muslim feminists. We had to ponder

how publication might effect the situation of women's mosques and female *ahong*. Could international Islamic funding agencies, the religious authority attached to Arabic Islamic pronouncements, exert pressures for change? Already certain sensitivities are apparent wherever Muslim congregations in large Chinese cities are international or funding from Arab Muslim countries is hoped-for. But Muslim women confidently place their trust in the Chinese government and its continued implementation of the official policy on religious self-rule which, so they maintain, will fence off undue outside interference. For female religious leaders, bargaining with patriarchy is steeped in decades of useful political experience.

Our methodology arose from project-related contingencies, scarcity of scholarship (international and Chinese, see Chapters II, III) and most crucially from our women's studies perspectives, guided by what Janet Bauer calls the 'metaphor of agency' (Bauer, 1997:223), that is, reliance on ethnographic work and focus on individual life testimonies.

But ethnographic and oral history methodology needed supplementing with historical research and textual analyses. Clearly from the few studies which deal with women and Chinese Islam, urgent questions had not been asked concerning the internal constitution of Islamic organisation (see Pang Kong-Feng's study of Hainan's Utsat Muslim women, 1997) and entirely lacking was an historical perspective on the genesis of women-centered institutions not a part of Islam elsewhere (absent also in Alles, 1994). An historical reconstruction was necessary which involved a close analysis of seminal works which form part of the corpus of Chinese Islamic knowledge, entirely male writing. Making use of the periodisation of Muslim history defined by the Hui historian, Bai Shouyi (1985), we situated the various use-values assigned to Muslim wives and mothers within specific, shifting political and cultural configurations defining historical relations between successive imperial administrations and Muslim populations in the context of which women came to be 'boundary subjects' (Julia Kristeva, 1993) of a re-imagined and re-invented religious and cultural identity (Chapters III, IV).

The Book: Authorship and Perspectives

We have felt it important that the book reflect our differences in background, cultural identity and academic framework of reference. We did not want a collaboration across cultures, religions and academic disciplines, and our dialogue over differences, to disappear into a homogenised, therefore distorted, authorial voice which in consequence would not have represented either of us.

When Shui Jingjun reconstructs the genesis and subsequent development of women's religious culture in *zhongyuan diqu* (Central China; Chapters II.2, III, IV), her reading of women's religious rights, attainments and predicaments, is rooted in an understanding of sexual solidarity which for her underpins ethnic and religious Muslim solidarity and commonality in defence of Islam, whether against explicit hostile aggression, forcible assimilative policies, or the even more subversive threats of secularism and modernity today. In Shui's interpretation the origin of women's high visibility thus lies in the unity of purpose felt by men and women in the face of external oppression and danger of assimilation during the sixteenth century, the 'era of adversity' for Hui Muslims in China. Her characterisation of male-female relationships in the light of early stress on female education, growing number of Koranic schools for women, training of women to enter the *ahong* profession and, then, in mid-nineteenth century, a mosque as a separate site of worship only for the use of women, is indicative of an underlying theme of harmony between women and men, mutual help and joint effort to serve Allah. Benefiting both.

Jaschok's reading has been influenced by scholars such as the postcolonial critic Mervat Hatem (1993), whose analysis of the symbolic and political uses of women in societies under external threat seemed relevant. Within her framework, a culture under threat may engage in contradictory treatment of women, with gender roles an integral part of the indigenous cultural and religious idioms, under the imperative to adapt to change in order to survive, yet equally fearful of the consequences of this change: what must be preserved by women (through education and inculcation) may also have to be protected against them (excluding women from religious and political positions of authority). Our laborious reconstruction of Muslim women's history in relation to its community's responses to threats to its survival shows up, Jaschok contends, analogous features.

Jaschok's writing on gendered historical processes reads communally-authored text in the tradition of 'oppositional' history wedged 'between the lines' (Chapter XI); and explores constructs of multiple identity in relation to different sources of memory construction (Chapter VIII); and both Shui (Chapter V) and Jaschok (Chapters IX, X) interpret the impact of *nusi* culture on definitions of women's morality, on the Islamic gendering of the Muslim female body and trace tensions derived from patriarchal appropriations of women's reproductive capacities and an intrinsic linkage with notions of inferior female spirituality.

Finally, life testimonies by three *nu ahong* and one agnostic Muslim woman may be seen as particularising our general findings, in representing women of a certain age-group, of a certain milieu and educational background, but they also

are qualifying our findings by reminding us of the uniqueness of personal experience and the complex constellation of forces and influences which are distilled into the texture of any given life (Chapter XII). Furthermore, they illustrate the personal conflicts arising for women when gender is constructed within an 'androcentric symbolism for humanity and God' and dramatically internalised through the 'rendering [of] appropriate subjectivity as masculine' (Graham, 1995:36). The weight of doctrine and practised religion which measure believing women as 'naturally deficient' then becomes defining of women's self-image (Chapters VIII, X).

The narrative by Shui Zhiying, who married into a family of generations of famous male *ahong* sounds a different chord: an educated professional woman whose personal experience and fate as a member of a persecuted ethno-religious minority left her with an abiding ambivalence that places her both inside the Hui Muslim community by virtue of her familial and communal ties as well as a shared history of suffering and outside it, due to secular education and professional environment as much as to personal life-history. It is an ambivalence which haunts also her niece, Shui Jingjun (see Preface). In this particular narrative of one woman's painful negotiation of competing claims on loyalty, memory, and subjective search for meaning, lies concealed a complex relationship with her past and with the community of belief of which she is a part.

Religiosity and Agency

'What is emancipation and how can it be achieved?' asks Janet Bauer (1997:242) and proceeds to make the case for greater recognition of the need for diversity in feminist thinking about perspectives on women's liberation. Puttick and Clarke (1993) reason that the gulf which exists between religious and secular women's movements is due to the hierarchical arrangement and internalised principles of submission by which religious traditions such as Islam are structured and thus central to maintaining gender subordination. Does the religious sphere stunt transformation in gender definitions and relations if we compare it to the secular sphere? In an overview of cross-cultural studies on fundamentalism and women (1997), Bauer suggests that the time has come to acknowledge the gains for women from a complementary between religious and secular movements. Both have made strides in negotiation of space for women, and both have met resistance in confronting abiding structural limitations (in the gendered nature of authority and power-holding positions). In the case of religious women's challenge to 'celestial patriarchy' the sources of recalcitrance may lie in various

sites of tension: male self-interest, the religious text (as historically embedded), larger structural inequalities or control of women's sexuality, so Bauer suggests.

Although in China at the level of sanctioned discourse the official paradigm of women's emancipation still holds, the many debates in popular media (Rosen, 1994; Einhorn & Yeo, 1995), in women's studies scholarship, in private discussions in political salons all over China, testify to a weakening of the Communist Party's monopoly over the principle of sexual equality (Croll, 1994; Barlow, 1994; see Chapters VIII, X). But believing women fit neither the early Maoist paradigm of liberation nor those paradigms propounded by present-day advocates of alternative models of modern womanhood, they were and still are the Other in a binary definition which leaves legitimacy for religious belief only as part of a minority status (whereby religion has become a cultural phenomenon under the patronage of the State, denoting a particular phase in the Center's civilising project of its 'peripheral people', according to Stevan Harrell, 1996; see Chapter VIII) or as a consolation for women suffering from 'false consciousness' brought about by women's disadvantages under economic and social reforms (Du Fangqin, 1988). Ironically, whereas Western feminism is concerned with problems which confront the female secular activist in the context of growing fundamentalism (see Brick & Mencher, 1997), we are engaged with not only religious activists' lack of ideological and political security but also their cultural 'double bind' of Confucianist and Islamic patriarchal constructs of femininity under which religious women must strain to position their quest for personal liberation.

The women's mosque as a site of opportunities for self-determination and agency, as a site of structural restraints and ideological reifications of feminine nature, suggests the need for its conceptualisation as relational and dynamic, set in specific contexts of place and time, to understand the conditions which created the differing degrees to which women could exercise autonomy, capability and vision. As an (abridged) illustration of the consequences of unequal gender status, Yang Huizhen *Ahong's* working life at the Jiaxing Women's Mosque in the 1940s demonstrates the full backlash of Islamic patriarchal institutions which an *ahong* could expect when she ventured beyond her mosque and the confines of physical and symbolic delineations of female identity. Yang Huizhen's story (for a full account and documentation, see Chapter XII) brings out most poignantly the predicament of a woman *ahong* presiding over a mosque dependent on male leadership who could not pursue an independent line of action (however worthy) without inviting serious repercussions for her position and livelihood. Her story also interprets the current upward trend for more independent *nusi* in Central China (noted in

Chapter IV).

Yang Huizhen

This following letter was written in 1946 by Yang *Ahong*, then in her thirties, at a time when the defeat of the Japanese army had been succeeded by fighting between Nationalist Government troops and the Communist armies. Refugees were fleeing some of the worst-affected areas in Central China, and many were fleeing to the relative safety of the South as for example to Jiaxing, a county bordering Shanghai.

Yang *Ahong* offered shelter to war refugees: widows, orphans, refugees mostly of Hui nationality but a number of Han people could also be found among them. She gave a roof to homeless and disabled people. She opened soup kitchens, collected donations for an income-generating venture to enable refugees to earn a livelihood; she set up a primary school for children from poor families offering them an education in religious and secular knowledge. This is what she wrote:

> These people, who have no food or clothes, are suffering untold miseries in this freezing cold weather. You all carry the responsibility of this enormous task of promoting the [Islamic] religion building the country, and relieving as many people in need as possible. Now I am again begging for your compassion on behalf of the helpless poor, please be kind enough to inform the Winter Relief Association of our frustration, and ask them to bestow their kindness on those who are lingering on in a steadily worsening situation and supply us with some relief. Your kindness as our benefactors will be appreciated and remembered forever (see Chapter XII for reference).

Just before she wrote this letter to untold numbers of individuals and organisations (Yang *Ahong* was literate in Chinese, Arabic and Persian), the All-China *Huijiao* (Islamic) Association together with the leadership of the local men's mosque fired her from her position. In a letter to the county magistrate, Mr. Hu, the chairman of the *Huijiao* Jiaxing Branch, Mr. Yang Jinhua, explained the reason for this termination:

> Our investigation proves that the former *ahong* Yang Huizhen is now no longer under contract and ought to move out of the mosque immediately. However, Yang refused to return the house although the mosque was badly in need of it. What is more, when she set up a Women's Association for the Muslim Widows and Orphans, she neither informed us (the Jiaxing Branch) beforehand nor reported to the local government as required. According to

> Article One, Section Two, of the Provisional Code of Conduct issued by the Association, any activities initiated in counties where a Branch is in existence, should be organised in the name of the Association only, no other institutions are allowed to be established. Yang Huizhen ignored the regulations, and what she has done is obviously illegal. She has lobbied everywhere and made derogatory comments about the Jiaxing Branch so as to cover up her own faults and misdeeds. To show its full sympathy with the Muslim poor, the Jiaxing *Huijiao* Branch has decided to make allowance for one or two of the homeless who are occupying rooms in the women's mosque, and see to it that they are provided with a new dwelling place. Now that the Jiaxing Branch together with responsible local people has taken back the mosque property, the house will be repaired for religious service. Considering Yang Huizhen's illegal activities, we decide to expel her from the Association and report her to the All-China *Huijiao* Association as a matter of record. We think it is necessary to also report this to you.

What was the problem? When Yang helped war refugees, widows and orphans, and used her mosque to grant a shelter and start concerted action for their physical and social survival, she violated the principle of segregation by which responsibilities and functions, relations with the wider community and interaction with community leaders, uses of a women's mosque and *ahong* position, are carefully mapped out, and protected through moral and religious exhortations, as well as through sanctions: loss of position, expulsion from the religious organisation, and discredited reputation.

Yang *Ahong* had disobeyed the Association and the men's mosque which paid her salary, had appointed her, and managed the women's mosque's finances; not only her disloyalty to her superiors rankled, but she had also ventured outside the mosque grounds, behaved unseemly by talking politics and organising activities, in every way unbecoming to the position for which she had been intended.

However, in time, after she had done so much good, had received so much support from the people, even the authorities could no longer ignore her. On the occasion of handout of relief supplies to refugees and orphans, the authorities sent delegates to 'oversee' the distribution of supply and organise a photo opportunity. One wonders what she must have thought on this occasion. She was not taken back by the Jiaxing mosque and in 1950 a meek and obedient *shiniang*, the wife of the new *ahong* at the men's mosque, replaced her. And her son, now a cadre and local historian, helped recover letters and documents which became one of our life testimonies (Guo Chengmei: Chapter XII). Yang *Ahong* returned to Shanghai where she died in 1989.

Yang *Ahong*'s experience tells us how women, given circumscribed responsibility and limited to an assigned sphere of responsibility, experienced in the process of carrying out their tasks constraints on actions they thought it right and Islamic to pursue. The case also illustrates the close linkage between women's subordinate place in religious organisation and unequal gender relations in society.

The status of a majority of women's mosques continues to reflect women's dependency on men's superior access to economic and theological resources (Chapters IV and VII in particular). However, the trend for greater self-determination, backed up by secular rights and a history of Maoist egalitarian indoctrination which propel women's return to radical egalitarian values of Islam, also allows women religious leaders to bypass such hierarchical structures that obstruct the direct relationship with God to which every Muslim is entitled, subverting both this-worldly and 'celestial patriarchy', to use a phrase from Janet Bauer (1997), and in the process of role reversal thus disengaging women from unequal gender roles (see discussion in Sister Sudesh, 1993; Vieda Skultans, 1993).

Yang *Ahong* was one of a long tradition of Henan-born female *ahong* who inspire respect, even awe and disquietude for their independence and learning among Chinese Muslims until today.

Women's Mosques: Documenting Statistics and Trends

Our work is almost entirely concerned with Hui Muslims who belong to diverse schools within the Sunni tradition from the Hanafi school of jurisprudence: divided up into the *gedimu pai* (traditionalists) who came with the earliest Arab Muslim settlers in the seventh century; these were challenged in the nineteenth century by the *yihewani pai* (reformist teaching), or New New Teaching, which arrived in Kaifeng, Henan, only in 1917 (the *yihewani pai* make up one-fourth of all Sunni Muslims). From a women's perspective, both have advocates and detractors when it comes to the institution of *nusi* and *nu ahong*. Revivalist Islam, which came to Southwest and Northwest China during the 1980s, challenges both earlier traditions as compromised by Confucian acculturation; this revivalist school is supportive of women's education, but opposed to women's mosques.

Statistics for the Muslim population can only be approximate because no census is taken on membership of Islam. The 1990 census lists 17.6 million Muslims in China (the State Council's White Paper, 1997, lists 18 million) of which nearly half are constituted by the Hui nationality (8.4 million), the most

populous of the ten minorities which are held to constitute the Muslim population and which form the focus of our study. Henan Province in Central China has the third-largest Hui population, settled in the classic settlement patterns of wide dispersion and small mosque-centred communities (Gladney, 1991, 1995).

Although students of Chinese Islam have traditionally studied Northwest Muslim culture, Gladney's important study of Hui Muslim ethnicity has persuasively argued the case for a more diverse treatment of Muslim lives (1991). Our study demonstrates that constructing a gender perspective on Muslim religious culture must entail the geographical shift to *zhongyuan diqu*, Central Chinese provinces clustered around Henan Province (Shaanxi, Shanxi, Shandong, Anhui, Hebei), which constitutes the historical birthplace of great educational project that eventually was to culminate into independent sites of worship for women.

Statistics, even after years of investigation, are still incomplete and approximate, and cover certain areas only. Regarding overall numbers, the recent White Paper on Religious Freedom (Information Office of the State Council, 1997) lists about 30,000 mosques, and about 40,000 *ahong* who are organised nation-wide under the auspices of the China Islamic Association.

The problem with quantifying the national scope of women's mosques is that only independent women's mosques are counted, because registered; the majority of women's mosques, attached or semi-attached, are subsumed under men's mosques (Chapter IV). And even independent women's mosques were invisible until 1993 and 1995, when religious sites of all five major religious traditions were registered, or re-registered, including women's mosques (see Chapter VII).

The dates of 1993 and 1995 are political watersheds for those women's mosques which met the official criteria: a fixed site; presence of a religious congregation; an administration of religious citizens; certified religious teachers who abide by religious regulations and preside over religious activities; fully developed administrative rules and regulations; a regular, legal source of income. With registration comes an equal social position, political representation, and recognition by various government bureaux as well as departmental visits to registered mosques on feast days and other occasions. From the women's perspective, registration is not a control mechanism, but a granting of desirable legitimacy (see Chapter VII).

In the absence right now of complete statistics (although we hope that with the trend for more complete registration, numbers will become more complete) an emphasis on trends rather than absolute figures might be more appropriate. For

Central Chinese Muslim communities this generalisation applies: women's mosques constitute at least one-seventh of *nansi* (men's mosques), with Henan listing a total of 91 registered mosques. Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan, has eleven women's mosques, four are fully independent. The trend is for rapid increase in the number of *nusi* (Chapter IV).

As a generalisation we have found that Muslim communities which have developed greater accommodation with the Han society, show classic settlement patterns of wide dispersion and small clusters, as in Central China, the trend is for establishment of women's mosques, for development toward independence, and for the presence of strong political consciousness, making women's religious organisation and authority a principle rather than privilege. Where the community is situated in borderland areas, besieged by political, ethnic, cultural tension, the matter of religious education, including that of women, becomes part of a politics of identity involving a given Hui community, and thus leaving little bargaining space for women.

Moreover, where no historical tradition of *nusi* obtains, women's schools are more easily set up than women's mosques, given their less controversial nature in Arabic Islamic orthopraxy, the impact of international Muslim funding agencies, and discriminatory gendered access to material and educational resources. However, Shui's hypothesis points to similarities with early stages of women's religious culture in Central China, and she argues that in Northwest China some current women' schools may evolve in time into independent multi-purpose *nusi*, as was the case in Henan.

Women Enacting Islam

In researching women's lives as shaped by Islam in Central China, we enter the complex history of Islamic indigenisation in China, its historical accommodation and recurrent quest for the pure faith of Islam. Based on Farida Shaheed (1994), we distinguish between Islam as ordained and the lived praxis of a culture-embedded religion, Muslim religion, in all its diverse local manifestations in diverse regions of China. In what sense is it thus meaningful to add our work to the embryonic, but growing corpus of cross-cultural women's studies in the area of fundamentalism and women?

Many of the issues which our study raised for us, exclusion of religious women from secular feminist paradigms, contested meanings of 'women's liberation and the path to this liberation', situated knowledge and the implications for methodology, are prominent in current debates around fundamentalism and gender.

Susan Harding refers to fundamentalism ‘as one of modernism’s “Others’”, as ‘apart from, even antithetical to, “modernity” which emerges as the positive term in an escalating string of oppositions between supernatural belief and unbelief, literal and critical, backward and progressive, bigoted and tolerant. Through polarities such as these between “us” and “them” the modern subject is secured’ (quoted in Brisco, 1997:12–13). Secular modernism in China defines itself on the back of religion (which carries however very historically distinct projections of backwardness, alienness, traditionalism, and minority culture) of which Islam with its peculiar equation with ethnic identity (Islam is tied to ten designated ethnic minorities) is a part of official dichotomising discourses over identity.

Earlier exhortations by feminist scholars to treat women, in the words of Carol P. Christ, as ‘theological subjects’ and their ‘truth claims’, ‘as the product of embodied *thinking* not as eternally or universally valid *thought*’ (1989:15, italics in text) have led to new perspectives. Representative of Muslim scholarship is Haleh Afshar (1993) who argues that it is time to identify the specific histories of women as multiple facets of Muslim cultures which are home to them. ‘It is essential to recognise the different historical and cultural contexts that have articulated the laws of Islam, and that have usually altered and adjusted them to the social and political needs of the time’ (1993:13). Feminist scholars of religion such as Janet Bauer (1997) treat the position of women in fundamentalist religion as not merely reactive and passive. The use of women-centred methodologies, life history and ethnography, which foreground the factor of agency, suggest challenging conclusions.

Fundamentalism understood as ‘returning to the basics of Islam’ (Pang, 1997:54) was the search among sixteenth century Hui intellectuals for religious and ancestral roots in a challenging foreign soil or, in the words of the sociologists of fundamentalism, Marty and Appleby, for ‘a strategy, or set of strategies by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group’ (Marty & Appleby, quoted in Brink & Mencher, 1997:6).

The foundation of an ‘uneasy co-existence’, as Raphael Israeli describes pre-Qing relations between Muslims and their host society (1980), a relevant characterisation until today, was outward conformity and inner adherence to Islamic faith. The Islamic scriptures were by virtue of linguistic barriers inaccessible to Chinese, and the Chinese sources, as Israeli points out, displayed a far more ‘conciliatory’ approach to co-existence (Chapter II.2). But it was an ‘uneasy’ status quo which during peaceful years might achieve mutually acceptable forms of co-existence, finding themselves as Hawley (1994:25) characterised fundamentalist religions elsewhere ‘in the odd position of sharing

meaningfully in the very plurality they despise' (1994:25); whereas during times of political chaos religious identity was foregrounded as part of a more oppositional policy, thus privileging a core Muslim identity normally concealed. From a women's studies perspective, under conditions of stress, so contemporary analyses of fundamentalist religions suggest, male elites may feel themselves 'feminised' in relation to the 'Other' overpowering presence, and threatened by physical or cultural annihilation, 'displace' frustration and anxiety over their impotence through assertion of control over women, a phenomenon McCarthy Brown (*1994*) refers to as 'religious machismo' (for a Muslim feminist analysis of male elite insecurity, see Tohidi, 1994).

The intellectual ferment of late Ming/early Qing Hui scholarly and religious production saw influential writers like Wang Daiyu, Ma Zhu, Liu Zhi (who together dominated sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth century Islamic *zeitgeist*) engage in the systematic construction of the *xianshu qiancheng* (good and virtuous, refined and pious) female paradigm which situated Chinese Muslim women in distinctly gendered worldly and religious spheres to become the cornerstone of an indigenised Islamic doctrine, infused with traditional Chinese cultural conceptions and theories of an ideal social order (Chapter II.2). In secular life, women were left almost no space for development beyond the domestic courtyard. However, they were encouraged to develop in religious life. Religious education of women and men was considered equally important, but subject to different educational texts and pedagogy and ultimately women's education, unlike that received by men, remained stagnant. Thus an ideal construct of Muslim womanhood emerged, and persisted, which came to influence the shape of religious education in Central China and in turn shaped women's lives with characteristics that made them uniquely different from Muslim women elsewhere in China.

Increasingly female-led and ultimately segregated sites of religious life culminated in the course of the nineteenth century in the establishment of women's mosques, presided over by female *ahong*, whose duties multiplied to encompass teaching, ritual and worship guidance, sermons, counselling, and other pertinent responsibilities (Chapters IV, VII). Historically, providing religious instructions and consolation, sexual education, knowledge of hygiene and sanitation, when non-Muslim women in China were still largely confined to virtuous ignorance (see, however, study of women in contemporary Jiangnan culture, Dorothy Ko, 1992; Susan Mann, 1992), these women's mosques, or in its earlier forms women's Koranic schools (*nuxue*), made important contributions to women's general and religious education, knowledge of self and the *umma* which transcended the political/ethnic boundaries set by a repressive

Han state. On the one hand, women were assigned central roles as carriers of a distinct way of life, whose access to collective memory, centered on the religion of Arab Muslim forefathers, was circumscribed and partial; on the other hand, although heavily gendered, religious education also developed in ways that we see as having granted opportunities for women to be educated, and to educate, beyond gender confines (Chapters II, III).

In the second wave of fundamentalism, the reformist school, *yihewani*, which entered Central China in late nineteenth century, saw itself as leading Muslims back to fundamental values, compromised in traditionalist praxis, through the instrument of education. Women were encouraged to improve their understanding of Islam through acquisition of systematic knowledge and an unbinding of crippled feet at the same time as a more concealing religious dress was encouraged and women were warned to protect their purity through avoidance of culturally contaminating entertainment and celebrations. Segregated sites of learning and worship therefore also became a feature in the reformist or New New Teaching.

The third wave of Islamic revivalism has been sweeping parts of Southwest and Northwest China since the 1980s, pressing for criticism of all preceding traditions as over-written by non-Islamic values and practices, and leading the way to a more modern, scientific religious praxis through a modernised education which combines thorough religious understanding with secular knowledge, to be taught to both women and men.

We see the relationship between fundamentalism and women in the nature of a dialogic relationship, initiated by dominant patriarchal voices in which women's and men's 'nature' and disposition and social function received codified expression (Chapter III), but which have also engendered conditions conducive to women's self-determination and even a conflictual path of development steered by a few independent *nu ahong*. We argue that complex constellations of cultural and social factors, coming together at a particular moment, in a specific location, have given women who engage in religion, creative or liberating opportunities. The study of women's actual lives through the guiding metaphor of agency in ethnographic work and focus on individual life testimonies elicits engagement and involvement rather 'than reaction or negative agency' (Bauer, 1997:223). The attention on women therefore rather than exclusively on gender is now producing cross-cultural studies of religion and women's lives and roles in religion, on the way rules are altered, stretched and adapted (Brusco, 1997; Fried!, 1997), in which Chinese women's lives are also usefully studied.

What has become evident to us, indeed as is suggested by recent cross-cultural work in this field, is the importance of women and gender to fundamentalist

religion establishing a mixed impact on women, ‘mixed blessing’ (title of a recent publication), which can be oppressive or liberating. What is also evident is that believing women are no less capable of agency, able to challenge both male authority in religion ‘and the primacy of (secular) feminist discourse about women’s liberation – it offers a vision of liberation that is both similar to and different from secular feminism’ (Bauer, 1997:239).

A Mosque of their Own?

In discussing the construction of a ‘peripheral’ ethnic identity as in the nature of the ‘civilising project’ by the Communist ‘Centre’, Stevan Harrell draws parallels between ‘minorities’ as ‘peripheral’ and ‘women’ as ‘subordinate’: ‘they are conflated at some level of the imagination’, he suggests. ‘Minorities are like women, so women represent minorities’ (Harrell, 1996:12–13). Arc women merely the metaphorical markers of the Centre’s (State, Party) superiority over peripheral minority culture?

Recent feminist scholarship by scholars such as Tani Barlow (1994) has shown that the Party’s markers of a superior Maoist construct of womanhood, while espousing an uncompromising mono-paradigmatic sexual egalitarianism in the construct of *funu*, are no longer uncontested. But does this ‘perplexing’ debate between orthodox Maoist discourse with its in-built model of secular progress and modernity, and the New-Era gender scholarship of the late ‘80s, no less opposed to non-secular choices, leave room for those groups of women who stand outside their shared equation of atheism and women’s progress towards equality?

Women’s rights and interests (*quanyi*) in China are embedded in an impressive matrix of domestic and international legislation (Keith, 1997). The key legislation being *The Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women* of 1992 which calls for the specific role of the All-China Women’s Federation and, under Chapter III, Article 14, guarantees equal rights with respect to culture and education. There is no mention of religion but a liberal definition of Article 20 which calls for equality in cultural activities might be interpreted to incorporate such meaning. Chapter IX, under the heading of Supplementary Provisions, allows for ‘appropriate adaptations or supplements … in light of the specific conditions of the national women in respective areas’.

More explicitly, in the White Paper on freedom of religious belief in China, released by the Information Office of the State Council on 16th October 1997 (*China Daily*, 17 October 1997:4–5), it is stated: ‘As in many other countries,

China practises the principle of separating religion from education; religion is not a subject taught in schools of the popular education in China …' It then continues to say that religious activities for which properly appointed religious leaders are responsible, 'are protected by law as the affairs of religious bodies and believers themselves and may not be interfered with'. A separate section treats the Protection of the right to freedom of religious belief for ethnic minorities and declares the resolution of the Government to safeguard the 'normal religious activities of the ethnic-minority believers'. Financial subsidies for mosque building, organisation of pilgrimages, research into religious culture, all are organised by the China Islamic Association, which manages Islamic life at all levels of Muslim society. There is no mention, however, anywhere of women's rights as distinct from collective rights. Women are subsumed under the designation of religious and ethnic 'minority' over which appointed religious leaders exercise a circumscribed authority. On the whole, this is still male authority. Government control is concentrated in departments responsible for managing ethnic and religious affairs (Minority Affairs and Religious Affairs Bureau). In this sensitive area of State-periphery negotiation the Women's Federation defers to Government authority. Its claim to representation of all Chinese women is thus mediated and circumscribed by factors of religion and ethnicity (for the role of the All-China Women's Federation concerning women's rights, see R.C. Keith, 1997; Rai, 1992).

The privileging of secular education, apart from a small number of State-monitored institutions of religious training, over religious education leaves the problem of funding of Islamic education to the Muslim communities themselves which, although increasingly active in creating their own facilities, suffer particularly in the rural areas from low standard of living and limited resources. What economic resources can be generated at a time when general withdrawal of central State subsidies have created an educational vacuum in many rural areas go to the more important men's mosques and affiliated schools. Women worshippers have less money at their disposal, less social network to rely on for practical and material support, less connection in the commercial world which might be applied to for funding. Their limited interaction with the outside world (more worshippers from abroad can be seen in men's mosques) means little knowledge of outside funding agencies. A complicating factor comes into play in that even if such organisation in the Arab-Muslim world can be identified, doctrinal objections to such 'aberration' from Islam culminate in rejection of funding applications.

A mosque is not one's own if it lacks vital resources, or if the *nu ahong's* salary, the mosque's revenues and expenditures, ceremonial duties, alms,

charitable functions, and so on, are the affairs of the Committees of men's mosques. Yang *Ahong*, whose story we told at the beginning, provided a poignant illustration of the strictures imposed on dependent and semi-dependent women's mosque leaders, still in the majority.

What is at stake? Women's eternal life, and a wider recognition that this is a matter of overriding concern for women's life as they negotiate the present. Quoting Mircea Eliade, Mernissi demands that women's personal experience of the sacred be treated as 'the real par excellence' and thus as 'a source of life and fertility' (Mernissi, 1996:27). The internal debate among Chinese Muslims has been how to nourish this faith (*yimani*) in a situation of diaspora. To quote Mernissi again: 'Islam is the religion of knowledge' (1996:113). Faith and knowledge are intrinsically linked in an equation which is the basis of Islam. The history of the institution of the women's mosque is that abiding, and central, aspiration 'to exist alike in time and eternity' (Eliade, 1976) which, given the diasporic predicament of the overwhelming majority of women believers, requires a continued efficient functioning of women's mosques under the leadership of women *ahong*.

What is at stake? Women's rights to education as a constituent of faith and as contributing to their status and security in society as holders of the faith. In Chapters II, III, and IV we reconstruct a history which goes back more than 400 years and which has engendered a strong sense among Muslim women in Central China of the legitimacy of their right to their own mosques, but a history of neglect of women's concerns has also produced the phenomenon of an educational curriculum (consisting of five basic texts, the so-called Women's Koran, *nurenjing*) which has not changed in language (ancient Persian) or content (seventeenth century morality fused with Islamic doctrine) since first compiled and copied in the First Cultural Movement of late Ming/early Qing China. Born out of a progressive spirit of concern over a diaspora in danger of religious amnesia and over the fate of women's spiritual state, the stagnation of women's education, in contrast with education as it evolved and was reformed for men, also points to women's ultimate exclusion from the great educational and intellectual projects of a more recent history and a marginalisation to which the Islamic patriarchy and secular State policy contributed.

Current debates over innovation in relation to women's rights in Islam have fastened on the relative backwardness of education and training of female students of the Koran, female *hailifan*, which is provided at women's mosques, some without educational facilities due to lack of resources, turning this fact into an argument against separate spheres of religious life and for a re-integration of women's mosques into male management and supervision (see below).

The position of female leaders (*nu ahong*) is under increased pressure. Many women of the older generation are concerned about the implications of reform for their own authority; literate, more often than not semiliterate, only in ancient Persian, the lack of Arabic and Chinese literacy compounds their difficulty to retain respect for their leadership and to justify their existence to a society in which their female congregations want to participate meaningfully in order, as the poem says, 'to meet the movements of change'. Not to reform is to invite the probability that women *ahong* and their mosques will wither away as irrelevant to the needs and demands of younger women who aspire to a modernity which is reflected in religious education and access to secular and worldly knowledge.

Inferior training of female *ahong*, handicapped by the fact that the larger established Islamic Colleges in China do not admit women students, and generally more limited education provided by women *ahong*, reinforces the notion that women are inferior also spiritually to men. (A popular prejudice backed up by abundance of Hadiths on the sad state of women's souls and dire predictions as to their fate in afterlife.) This perception of female *ahong* as inferior to the learnedness and spirituality of male *ahong* complicates, even delays, attempts to establish an equality in terms of career prospects, training, conditions of work, salary and social recognition. In turn, this is preventing some young, ambitious and educated women from considering a career as an *ahong*.

All these above-enunciated problems exacerbate difficulties for women's mosques to improve their standing in the community and, closely related to this, to attract financial resources. Therefore the contribution women's mosques can, and do, make to the education of children, adolescents, and older women in particular in rural areas where illiteracy and ignorance are still a feature of contemporary Chinese society, is circumscribed by local and international constraints, political, religious or ethnic in constitution which reinforce their threefold oppression: as women, as members of a religious minority, and as members of an ethnic minority.

The trend however towards independence is clearly propelled by an insistence on the right of religious equality and peer pressure that news of successful independent women's mosque bring (Chapter VII). The most important factors which decide this development are location, origin, and affluence as well as personal influence of an *ahong* and the competency of a mosque administration. A further factor is government policy of registration of religious sites and the legal and political recognition, thus legitimacy granted to *nusi* if eligible for registration.

A factor not taken up by Zhu Li (Chapter VII) deserves further consideration: the role of celibate life-style in relation to gender relations in society. Where the

widowed or separated *ahong* is proudly independent of men in her personal life, and prides herself on purity of conduct, she is more likely to disengage from notion of discipleship, more inclined towards defining a direct relationship with God, unobstructed by male dominated institutions. Vieda Skultan's observations on the Brahma Kumaris are pertinent. She remarks on the important link between celibacy and the dissolution of the gendered structuring of religion: 'Celibacy opens up the possibility of more varied relationships with men, of female dominance and also of a kind of camaraderie which would otherwise be unthinkable' (Skultan, 1993:54). In the Chinese case, the concept of purity becomes a powerful means, because at the core of religious values, by which to break with gender norms. *Jie*, purity, closely connected to Muslim women's traditional moral cultivation of pious wife and motherhood (Chapter II.2), transplanted to, and transmuted within, a modern context, has become women's critique of men's mosque greater affluence, of feudal distortions of the radical soteriology of early Islam, of worldly attachment, thus turning woman, 'the deficient Muslim', into a rival claimant for spiritual equality as much as political rights (Chapter VIII).

In contrast, where it is the case, still, as it was historically the norm, that the *nu ahong* is the wife of the male *ahong*, social norms governing religious life incorporate the women's mosque into the sphere of influence under the control of male religious and administrative leadership: economically, politically, spiritually.

Indeed, the preference for *nuxue* in the regions of North, Northwest and Southwest China (Chapters III, IV), among them many reformist, but even more so revivalist Islamic groups, is a preference for women as disciples led by men. Thus 'religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific … metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other'. (Clifford Geertz, quoted in McCarthy Brown, 1994:184)

The Failure of Changying *Nusi* in Qinyang City, Henan Province

Changying *Nusi* is one of six women's mosques in Qinyang, a mediumsized township (north of Zhengzhou) where the Hui Muslim population amounts to about 10 per cent of the total. The mosque was originally a men's mosque closed in 1958. In 1986, a group of women, all over 60 years of age, went to the government and asked that the men's mosque be given to them for their use as a women's mosque, which the government did. One woman in the group was over 70 years; her grandfather had built the mosque. Still today, in 1998, many

touching stories are told about the proud moment when in 1986, on the demands of women believers, the opening of the *Nusi* was graced by the presence of their new *nu ahong*, the knowledgeable, charismatic Yang *Ahong*, then recently widowed. Yang *Ahong* is renowned for her strong personality, oratory gifts, and learning in both Arabic and Persian. What made her of particular interest to the researcher were her passionate convictions that women's education is in a lamentable state (*feichang zaogao*), that the educational situation of Muslim women could be considered to have reached a state of crisis, reflecting on both secular and religious knowledge, and that State neglect of education and the Muslim establishment's failure of leadership combined to bring about this state of affairs. In this context, women had to help themselves. The women's mosque under her leadership could provide the necessary means to help toward a solution, at least for local women, and eventually for Muslim women from all corners of the province. A small educational project for five religious students, her *hailifan*, was already in existence. But the small size of the mosque building, lack of equipment and classroom buildings as well as of dormitories prevented envisaged expansion. As she explained to us, she envisaged a curriculum that would help women to gain access to the word of God, and help them to become good Muslims. She also wanted to help these women to become good wives, mothers, and workers; teach them about their origin, about Chinese history and laws, therefore helping to create the conditions for smooth relations between Han and Hui communities. The area in which this *nusi* is situated suffers from such problems as an early drop-out rate among girls from school, absenteeism, early marriage, high fertility, thus 'generating spiritual confusion and worldly ignorance'.

The women's mosque was bequeathed a plot of land, adjacent to the mosque which could be used to build a school. The interview in which the *Ahong'*s vision was voiced took place in the spring of 1996. Nothing has occurred since then. The local authorities are indifferent. The men's mosque in the same *fang* (parish) has difficulty supporting its own educational facilities. Other women's mosques in surrounding *fang* can offer no assistance. Funding agencies in Saudi Arabia (espousing orthodox Islamic gender ideology) object in principle to benefiting a women's mosque under a female *ahong*. The land lies waste. The women receive no education. Yang *Ahong* has grown ill under the oppressive guilt that she is failing women who have looked to her to facilitate their salvation.

The Mosque as a Social Space: Wherever there is a Mosque, there

is Allah

In the Hui Muslim diaspora identity, the essential identification with Arabia and the universal Islamic *umma* created a 'temporariness' and 'infinality' of life-style and Muslim organisation, observes Raphael Israeli of Hui Muslim life in pre-modern (pre-Qing) China (1980:53). The fostering of strong, independent communal organisations centred on the mosque, a visible symbolic and social emblem of a different faith, and a continuous memory of ancestral roots elsewhere.

When we observe the diversity of mosque architecture, the rich variety of exterior design and ornamentation, and their source of cultural inspiration in Arabic, Persian or Confucian design and spatial construction, we see different local traditions of accommodation. In the time which Bai Shouyi (see Chapter III for Bai's periodisation of Hui history) characterised as 'time of adversity' (*enan shidai,* fourteenth century – 1911), a secretive code of fostered Muslim identity evolved. Concealed under exteriors indistinguishable from an all-enveloping Han civilisation, mosques in Central China have featured in their outer appearance all the characteristics of Confucian lineage halls, and inside have nurtured the culture of Arabic Islam: in its austerity of plain white-washed walls, Arabic inscriptions, the *yaodian* (inscription or tablet) marking the direction of prayer, the prayer-rugs waiting for worshippers' ritual obeisance to Allah. This inner-outer divide, the rupture between core (religious) and ascribed (cultural) identity, threads itself as a theme throughout Hui Muslim life in China (also see Chapters VIII, X) in the recreation of Muslim way of life in private homes that is largely invisible to outsiders, in the language used between believers (*jingtangyu*) that is smoothly switched to Chinese when outsiders join in as much as Muslim modest clothing with its often nearly imperceptible religious code (see Chapter IX). 'While the inner aspects of Muslim life', remarks Raphael Israeli, 'showed a high degree of concern for the preservation of the Faith, the outer aspect evinced a certain degree of acculturation, even if this was not "intentional"' Israeli continues: 'The new practises … involved adoption by Muslims of Chinese material culture, but in the main stopped short of value transformation' (1980:31). The internal cohesion of Muslim communities in the face of external hostility engendered thus 'a constant dialectical relationship between the Chinese attitude and the Muslim response' (Ibid: 35). The challenge faced in relation to Chinese society may be less directly obvious today than was the case under imperial administrations, but as Israeli rightly points out, the fundamental contradictions that must exist in terms of values between Muslim and non-Muslim society makes the preservation of religious values an unceasing

negotiation with an Other.

Israeli does not consider women in the relation between Muslim strategies for preservation of undiluted faith and accommodation dictated by political realities of power as well as imperceptible absorption of an all-permeating host culture, on the one hand, and State ideology and policy on the other hand. Does the historical presence of women's mosques as sites of religious but also social activity fit in seamlessly with readings of Muslim solidarity and unison in the face of external threat? Shui Jingjun answers this question by maintaining that for believers mosques belong to Allah. Muslims see their responsibility in the construction and proper maintenance of mosques and not in claiming exclusive ownership over them, therefore precluding rivalry along gender lines. In Shui's interpretation, group solidarity ultimately overrides gendered interest.

In this interpretation, the building of mosques is essentially a deeply religious statement: the mosque belongs to God, is erected for the worship of God in order to obtain salvation and preserve oneself from the torments of hell. 'The places of worship belong to God' (*Koran*, 72:18). And in Buhali's Hadiths it is written, 'whoever, whether mornings or evenings, goes to the mosque, or on his travels remembers to pass by a mosque, for him Allah will prepare a seat in Heaven' (Buhali, 1981:212). Shui thus holds that for the great majority of Muslims in *zhongyuan diqu* (Central China) regardless of whether the mosque built is for the use of men or women, the project contributes to the Islamic cause of enlarging the religious culture and obtaining Allah's mercy. In Chen Keli's translation of the Hadiths, it is written that 'Whoever builds a mosque for the pleasure of Allah, Allah will build him in paradise such a mosque' (Chen Keli, 1994:135). It is thus a common sight to behold Muslim women and men work as one in constructing or enlarging a mosque, might it be for the use of men or of women. In consequence, the establishment of women's mosques, although fulfilling multiple service functions and women's congregations' social needs, from family blessings to funereal rites, is not the fruit of Muslim women's fight for secular rights, nor is the purpose a secular one. These sites are expressions of yearning for Allah and for a place in Heaven.

Jaschok has somewhat different interpretations from those put forth by Shui. Whereas it is undisputed that any mosque is first and foremost expression of collective worship of Allah, the matrix of ritual taboos and prohibition which criss-cross the bodies of worshippers who enter the mosque ground to participate in ritual prayers reflects gradations and differences of purity and impurity, enlightenment and ignorance, which are not gender-neutral. Muslim practices elsewhere commonly prohibit women's collective worship in mosques; however also in the history of Chinese Muslim praxis, the debates and restrictions which

burdened the evolution of a women's religious culture from its very inception, the continuing conflict over legitimacy of continuing women's mosques, their disappearance in some regions and controversies where the trend is rising (see Chapters III, IV), the current tensions between women's mosques striving for independence and Islamic patriarchal leadership requesting their curtailment, if not closure (see Chapter VIII), are indicative of an ongoing strain in relations between women and men over definitions and realisation of contested notions of social and sexual equality and their place in the religious sphere.

The historical experience of women's appropriation of space of their own, their invoking of non-Hui Chinese interest to claim rights in the religious sphere required the examination of a more complicated constellation of identity and interest than for example encompassed by Israeli's framework of Hui Muslim cohesiveness (see Chapters VIII, X).

The Mosque as a Spiritual Space: On Hell and Heaven

At the end of voluble explanations over the place of her mosque in her life, an old Muslim woman, preparing to start her ablutions, turned around again and added in a reflective voice: '…like a taste of paradise'. When we referred to women's mosque buildings as memory archives, they are to believing women not only a vindication of their past but also a symbol of the promise of eternal life, extending time beyond biological, patriarchal life-cycle and expiration dates, and their ascribed *yin* nature as belonging to earth and its transitory phenomena (Chapter II.2). The engendered heaven of Maoist derivation, which kept women from attaining full sexual equality promised by the slogan 'Women are Half of the Sky' (see Croll's argument, 1994, also Chapters VIII, X in this volume), as well as Islamic patriarchal appropriation of celestial pleasures (see below), are in equal measure challenged when women begin to approach God directly, without male intermediary.

As argued in Chapter IX, the gender hierarchy implicit in women's absence from religious sites and positions of spiritual authority was undercut when women *ahong* positioned themselves as spiritual brokers between God and women congregations, when they shifted traditional prescriptions on Muslim femininity, bounded and safeguarded by domestic walls, to become positive strategies of defending the purity of women's spirituality in order to sustain the independence of women's spiritual sites. Thus, understanding concepts of *nusi* which we argue are the outcome of Islamic and Confucian principles of segregation, as historical and dynamic, women's active qualities as theological subjects can be understood in relation to their re-interpretation and

transformation of material culture. Interpreted in this light, sexual segregation is not just an expression of male power but a choice made by women (Gilchrist, 1994:167). ‘Studies of gender and space’, so Gilchrist maintains, ‘must ask how space reinforces or transforms one’s knowledge of how to proceed as a man or woman in one’s society’ (1994:151).

Women *ahong* teach their congregations to believe firmly in eternity of life, in accordance with the sacred revelations in the Koran; to believe in the two angels, Munkar and Nakir, who examine, and punish, wherever necessary, the dead in their tomb; to believe in the existence of hell to be dreaded and heaven to be yearned for. A woman will enter heaven, so the Women’s Koran (*nurenjing*) promises, if ‘she performs her duty to worship, her obligation to observe Ramadan, conceals her shameful body (*xiuti*), and submits to her husband’ (see Chapter X). Although women believe that they will be positioned in the lowest sphere of heaven (of which there are eight, its populations ranked in accordance with their degree of purity), farthest away from God, descriptions in the Women’s Koran speak of a beautiful and mysterious place, of unspeakable sweetness of sensations as the believer quenches her thirst and pangs of hunger with fairy peaches (*xiantao*), clothed in celestial garments (*xianmao* and *xianyi*), enveloped in aromatic scents, savouring celestial scenery of mist-shrouded mountains. The imaginings of celestial bliss are nourished by popular Han Chinese legends of peach fairies and the god of longevity (*shouxinglao*) who holds in his hand the peach as the most precious of fruits. Women believers are told that whilst women and men will enjoy alike the delights of paradise, it will be done in strict adherence to the laws of purity. Men are attended by young boys (*xiantong*), women will be attended by young girls (*xiannu*) as is *halal* (proper). By the same principle, a continued sexual segregation will entail the congregation of female souls in the eighth sphere of heaven, apart from men.

More vivid imaginings of hell reflect the predicament of women who are faced with an in-built contradiction: in order to be a good Muslim, they must be good wives and mothers. The Muslim’s duty of increasing her religious knowledge to attain perfect faith, to attend to the daily duties of purification and praying, are in daily life at odds with her inability to reconcile time-consuming domestic duties with the time-consuming task of learning, ablution and prayer. The extent to which women *ahong* are able to allay women’s fear and dread of damnation, because of inferior religious knowledge, and transform a female tradition of spiritual pessimism into hopeful spiritual renewal has been the subject matter of our investigation into the individual agency of *nu ahong* against a background of personal and collective pressures over the far-reaching implications of traditionalist versus reformist policies for women’s own religious

culture.

In the same way that we note a growing debate in the larger context of Han Chinese society of how women measure the gulf between paradigmatic ideals of emancipation and contentment and their own aspirations and capabilities, we discern among Muslim women parallel diversification of strategies of the way they aspire to an ideal, strain to match demands on their family and religious duties, and reconcile vision with a given reality.

The impact of a *nu ahong*, a site for congregation for collective spiritual advancement, learning, prayer, and the experience of membership of a community of believers, however small, are undeniable catalysts of existential and social transformation in women's lives and of potential facilitation of more dynamic social engagements of believing women, as individuals and as a collective, to make their visions count in the wider discourses on societal change. Women *ahong* are wont to say: what would our congregation do without us? However, whether their leadership intensifies dread of eternal punishment and social inferiority, or decreases fear of hell because of opportunities of learning and affirmation of women's capacity for improvement, or even creates ambiguities in the minds of worshippers, their particular influence is as much a reflection of given local cultural and material conditions as of their capacity to address issues of gender relations in family and society at large at a meaningful religious level of interpretation. Chapter VI illuminates the strength of Confucian culture which historically permeated and qualified Islamic family law so as to fit local conditions; the examination of organisation and culture of women's mosque themselves are understood in Chapter VII against a context of overall gender relations in the host society.

Women's Mosques: Development and Challenge

The role of men in women's religious education remains an undisputed force: not only in Northwest China, because the general educational level of women, whether secular or religious, is low and initiatives must come from men or be supported by them; but also in Central China, where religious and social developments are complicating gender relations in Muslim society to a degree of unprecedented animosity.

The great tradition of *nusi*-based education is the subject of an internal debate over its relevance to the needs of modern Muslim women who are like all Chinese women confronted with troubling developments. As described above, modernisation of the economy and political de-centralisation have disadvantaged women to an extent that, so many Chinese scholars argue, serious inroads have

been made into the gains women experienced under Communist government, creating new inequalities which only renewed emphasis on pertinent female education and vocational training can help resolve (see Gao Xiaoxian, 1994; Liu Bohong & Sung Rong, 1995). An important original function of *nusi* had been the cultivation of proper Islamic morality, and women's morality (*fudao*) in particular (Chapter V). But social space, so Roberta Gilchrist (1994) reminds us, is a complex and active concept which changes as it is worked upon by life-experience, agency and will. Women's mosques have not only acted as conduits for infusions of changing notions of spiritual and social justice and sexual equality, their most urgent task, historically and at present, has consisted in the education of religious women which also includes in growing measure secular teaching.

The withdrawal of a paternalistic state from certain state sectors, including education, allows for the 'contradictory situation' (Shirin Rai, 1992) of a re-emergence of patriarchal values (i.e., a defensive Islamic patriarchy) and a growing disjuncture between 'culture' and 'social structure', the former representing an 'ordered system of meaning and symbols' and the latter standing for 'the *form* that action takes, the *actually existing* network of social relations' (quoting Geertz, in Rozario, 1992:2; emphasis in text).

The *nusi* as a hindrance or help in Muslim women's prospect of meaningful participation in a changing society serves as explosive ammunition at a time when some Muslim leaders incline to argue for its abolition and others argue as strongly for its survival. Women *ahong* and *ahong* representing revivalist Islam are most bitterly opposed. Not all *nu ahong* reject modern education, indeed particularly younger ones realise the troubling implications of stagnation, namely growing peripherilisation – and are starting changes in their congregations. But it is now the culture of women's mosques which is at a cross-road: confronting in-built historical limitations (man-made) which link its identity so closely to what are now considered obstacles to reform. Reforming these limitations is not only to transcend unproductive segregation, as the revivalists argue, it is also undermining, so fear the women *ahong*, the hard-won rights of *duli*, independence.

Shui's interpretation suggests that the tradition of segregation, a static educational curriculum, and an outmoded training of women *ahong* have made the traditional female *ahong* a reluctant partner in the enterprise of educational reform, in many places fighting what older *ahong* perceive as a threat to their self-determination and independence: in the form of *zhonga xuexiao* (modern Chinese-Arabic Schools) where girl students are admitted; or existing religious schools, which arc turning slowly coeducational (Chapters III, IV).

Whereas Shui sees recalcitrance and traditionalism on the part of *nu ahong* where the cause of Islam should inspire all to work together (as men have after all supported women, she says); Jaschok maintains that when *nu ahong* seemingly resist modernisation and modernity, and collaboration with male *ahong* and teachers, they resist the bind of discipleship which reinforces feminine virtues of devotion, receptivity, humility and self-effacement, which is so central to fundamentalist religion and revivalist Islam, and to sexual inequality. As Elizabeth Puttick and Peter Clarke (1993) put it in their cross-cultural work on women as teachers and disciples: 'is discipleship good for women?' Is the blending of spiritual qualities and ideal feminine virtues in the notion of 'submission' in the way of self-realisation of women who, as in the case of Muslim women in Central China, negotiate space because able to bargain with, and play off against each other, different sites of patriarchy: the State and Islamic male dominate mosque organisation?

We shall have to await further developments to know how independent *nusi* are going to perform when challenged by calls for educational reform and internal re-organisation without losing their independence or unique women-centred culture.

Placing women in the discourse between state and nationality, Han majority and Hui minority, secular progressive state legislation and Muslim customary law as Hui tradition (thus protected by legislation), opens up provocative questions in which 'woman' functions as a multiple representation of tradition, communal identity, national sovereignty, modernity, and modernisation in the on-going 'movements of change'. The call in the poem to Muslim sisters to leave 'closed courtyards' and turn to the 'light of the sun' has historical precedents which as we suggest have come from collective diasporic needs for women's extension of familial to collective responsibilities, and which in the course of this outward movement, brought unexpected changes to Islamic organisation. In present times, we observe women's claims for secular rights to strengthen their religious rights, claims directly rooted in Communist sexual egalitarian ideology and legislation, and which in turn contribute a religious voice to current diversification of paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of social change, sexual emancipation, path of emancipation and thus the dialectic between individual or communal values, on the one hand, and the role of the state as a source of human rights and meaningful justice, on the other hand.

In reconstructing the history of Muslim women we are joining three debates: the contemporary Chinese debate over the Maoist paradigm of women's liberation and appropriate means of liberation affected by the growing diversity of this debate in the late 1990s (Chapter VIII); an internal debate over the

significance to Islamic doctrine and organisation of religious women's transformation of their spiritual and material culture as well as the constraints of this challenge (Chapters V, X, VI, and VII); and international discourses over the relationship between the Islamic concept of *bid'a* (*bidaerti*, aberration or innovation) and believing women's rights movement which we consider is the defining and unique feature of the Muslim diaspora in China. In the following chapter we consider first some of the pertinent representative feminist voices in international scholarship and then examine the linkage between *bid'a* and the ideological construction of femininity in Chinese Muslim intellectual history.

Part II

From the Margins of Memory

Chapter II

Scholarly Debates: Islamic Faith, Innovation (*bid'a*) and Constructs of Femininity

> … It is necessary to point out that through the centuries of Muslim history, these sources [of Islamic tradition] have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have abrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women (Riffat Hassan, 1991:95).

Our main contributions to cross-cultural scholarship in the field of Islam and women can be said to derive from the historical debate within Chinese Islam over the place, legitimacy and necessary control of such innovations (*bid'a*) as were considered instrumental causes of survival of the Muslim community in China. In this chapter, we explore some of the broader feminist discourses on the impact of Islamic religion on women, and of women on Islam, in a brief overview of leading international feminist scholarship situated, on the one hand, within a religious paradigm, which Helie-Lucas calls 'entryism', and, on the other hand, within a wider framework of 'internationalism' (Helie-Lucas, 1993). We then consider the definition and codification of this relationship as a part of our study of Chinese Islam, in our interpretation problematised as the systematic construction of a 'woman'-anchored Islamic symbolic and ethical order which we contend formed the ideological foundation of collective initiatives (during the first tide of Islamic revival in late Ming/early Qing China) to safeguard core religious values of Muslim life through outward cultural conformity to Han society (Israeli, 1980).

The Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi sees one of the most fundamental tensions in orthodox Islam arising from the ever-present dialectic between individual agency and innovation (*bid'a*) and its antithesis, the sacred as well as secular power of the (male) *umma* to safeguard its 'sacred law' as transmitted and prescribed by patriarchal authority. *Bid'a* is defined as 'the capacity of the individual to change his or her fate, life and thoughts about people and things,

and to act critically in accordance with one's own assessment of the situation' (Mernissi, 1996:111). How to reconcile historical contingency and respect for individual agency with reified Islamic praxis has become an issue of particular urgency in the era of current women's rights movements where women's demands for reappraisal of patriarchalised religious teaching are held to defy, even mock, sanctified traditions rooted in the immutability of God's ordained blueprint.

In the case of the Chinese Muslim diaspora it is not the independent individual but an independent female religious culture (represented by *nusi* and *nu ahong*) which is considered *bid'a*. Born of a historical crisis of faith and Hui Muslim identity (see following section), the growing trend towards a separate women's religious culture in Central China increases tension in Chinese Muslim circles as to whether, and how, to rein in such lack of orthodoxy. Renewed contact with the international (particularly Arabic) Islamic world has brought in its wake a growing awareness among Chinese religious leaders and *ahong* of the implications of their history for international Islamic pre-occupations with issues of authenticity which place *bid'a* in a class with 'errors, heresies' and all the destructive powers of modernity (Sadik J. Al-Azm, 1993). In this context, concepts such as women's participatory rights and sexual equality are an anathema.

In the course of reflecting on the origins and history of resistance by Islamic patriarchy to women's assertion of their rights, Fatima Mernissi (1996:109–120) ponders a pervasive ideological subtext of fear, insecurity and patriarchal conservatism in which acts considered aberrations from God's blueprint came to be closely linked to another concept, *nushuz*. The significance of *nushuz* lies in its particular meaning of women's acts of rebellion whereby woman, 'identified in the Muslim order as the embodiment of uncontrolled desires and undisciplined passions, is precisely the symbol of heavily suppressed individualistic trends' (1996:110). As the origin of sin and embodiment of earthly attachment, the female body was inscribed with taboos and prohibitions to suppress sinful passion as a site on which authority both secular (husband's) and spiritual (the *umma* as a surrogate for Allah's will) inscribed the rule of the *shari'a* (Islamic law) and of *hijab* (sexual segregation).

Challenge to a 'superior' because deified patriarchal consensus assigns to the concept of *bid'a* the stigma of deviation from the 'sacred law of the group' (Mernissi, 1996:111). Legitimacy for the claim to sacred collective authority derives from a cosmogony in which men have a dual role as God's servants and women's masters whereas women's foremost duty lies in unquestioning surrender to a mutually reinforcing worldly and celestial patriarchy as the sole

conduit of transmission of Allah's true meanings.

II.1 The Place of Women in Orthodoxy

In her analysis of an influential publication on the place of women in orthodox Islam, authored by the Egyptian scholar Shaykah Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi in 1982, Barbara Freyer Stowasser (1987) characterises the argument for an essentialised Muslim femininity as follows: anatomy shapes women's destiny and in turn must inform the duties and the rightful social sphere belonging to their sex. Women's primary work is in the home and only extreme situations, and the interest of their family, entitle women to be active outside the domestic sphere and expose themselves to the dangers of public life. These unavoidable excursions necessitate appropriate precautionary measures, and the obligatory veil functions thus to extend the boundaries of sexual segregation into the public male sphere to protect women, but more importantly still, to shield men from temptation and sin. An unveiled woman 'becomes guilty of corrupting all the males who come into contact with her' (Stowasser, 1987:272).

Whereas men's sexual instincts are domesticated at home, they are set loose abroad, and it is women who are defined, and bounded, by this ideological deceit. Men's social, political and religious ritual responsibilities are given institutionalised status in the public sphere of society whereas sexual needs and reproduction are catered to in the family context. Women's primary task of providing their lawful husbands with a 'safe' sexual channel for his needs, and for legitimate reproduction, entitle them to the privilege of protection from universal raw male instincts and thus transform women's confinement to the domestic courtyard into a female prerogative. Marriage and complementarity of functions, ethics and spirituality, are built on, and legitimised by, specific gender constructions of female and male nature.

Carefully selected Hadiths situate the theological and biological justification for an ideal Muslim society based on a sexual division of labour and segregated social life, in the origin of Eve's creation as 'a crooked rib' wrenched from Adam's rib-cage; although feminine reason may have been adversely affected by this mode of creation, women's tangled emotions and rushes of spontaneous passion are considered ideal prerequisites for the tasks of mothering and nurturing. Stowasser (1987) argues that conservative thinkers distinguish themselves not only by flexibility in the choice of Hadiths to support their argument and to omit those traditions and interpretations which might point to alternative approaches to interpreting Islamic sources, but also by inflexibility in their persistence of reification of women as a construct defined by womb and

erogenous zone. Indeed, nowhere do Islamic scriptures support an interpretation popular in certain conservative Muslim cultures (see below) which ascribes to Eve the responsibility for human fall from grace (with all its attendant punishments and ritual exclusion by which her descendants continue to be marked). Smith and Haddad (1982) have studied the selective use of Hadiths in which the image of Eve generates specific feminine prototypes: the temptress, seducer and creature of irrational passions. This interpretation not only turns anatomy into punishment (childbirth and menses) but also provides a theological imperative for women's submission to rational authority (embodied by imams and husbands).

Developing the theme of women's weak and undisciplined nature, and of their subordination to those gifted with enlightened reason, Fatima Mernissi (1996) expounds on the foundation of the patriarchal Islamic civilisation. In a cosmos split by a gendered dualism, the private sphere, associated with wordliness, ignorance, exclusion from space of ritualised collective worship (the site of the mosque), femininity receives its specific, divinely sanctioned expression in the enactment of submission to the husband; only the husband straddles both spheres, as the head of the family-on the one hand, and as belonging in the public sphere on the other hand, with its attendant rights and privileged access to knowledge, power and active membership of the *umma*. In Patricia Jeffery's words: 'Thus, sexual apartheid entails "separate development" as well as segregation. [But] there is little evidence that separate ever is equal (whether in the field of sex or race) even when it is dressed up as functional interdependence' (quoted in Carroll, 1983:218).

Gender hierarchy, dependence on male imams' superior understanding of the scriptures and commentaries, and the mandatory submission to a preordained fate presided over by a Divine Will (to which only a select few have access with all others acquiescing to a dimly-understood overarching presence), are the characteristics of Islamic orthodoxy; within this religious framework, democracy and emancipation, together with feminism, are rejected as heretical *bid'a* (Mernissi, 1996; Al-Azm, 1 993, for an analysis of fundamentalism in relation to the concept of *bid'a*).

Safeguarding Faith and the Communal Status Quo

How does orthodox Muslim praxis respond to the pressure for incorporation of greater diversity and of dissenting voices? Essentialist prescriptions on ordained femininity underpin the appropriation of women as national and communal symbols. Fear of changes, of innovation, and atomisation engender calls for all

Muslims to show their solidarity and unity through submission to the *umma*; specifically, for all women to submit to the will of Allah as represented by imams and husbands as their domestic representatives (Moghadam, 1993). Men's privileged access to religious education, and the Islamic equation of knowledge and purity of faith combine to keep women in a position of subordination before the authority of overpowering and unattainable knowledge (Mernissi, 1996:1 12–113).

What all Muslim societies and minorities have in common is the perception of being 'under threat', says Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas (1993), a threat to the faith and survival of the functioning community of believers. In the discourse of de-colonisation and national re-construction, women become the 'cultural repositories in the unconscious' of those who rule and shape societies (Helie-Lucas, 1993:209), whether in the context of perceived threats posed by westernisation (Turkey, Iran) or of cultural hegemony exercised by national dominant majorities (India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, African countries, and also China).

Highly politicised values such as patriotism and nationalism demand of women obedience which, as in the case of Algeria, place them between conflicting sources of identity, 'they cannot serve their cause as women and at the same time belong to the nation for whose very existence they have struggled' (Helie-Lucas, 1993:211).

Moghadam (1993) sees the neo-patriarchal state as restricting women in that 'Constructions of gender and discourses about women are sometimes a convenient weapon between contending political groups' (1993:125). In this framework, religion is a party to a socio-ideological and political matrix of great complexity. Patriarchal structures based on sexual division of labour, on the reproduction of patrilineal and patrilocal kinship, low urbanisation, proletarianisation and industrialisation inhibit women's mobility and escape from the family group. State policies and programs co-opt the family unit as welfare provider whereby women's progress is tied into overall objectives of social development. Against this 'ambiguous, open-ended, tense negotiation' of social change and modernity, contradictions are played out in the religious sphere. During periods of change, remarks Moghadam, women become markers and keepers of social processes, and in fundamentalist calls to return to the original faith they occupy key positions (1993:122–126).

Helie-Lucas's work (1993) provides further evidence for women's use-value to the construction of nation and community by showing how, whenever collective Muslim identity is threatened, women's loyalty and cooptation become crucial strategies in identity formation. It is this function as 'cultural

repositories' in the unconscious of both the colonised (patriarchy) and the colonisers which contributes to the obstruction in the path of women's emancipation. Yazbeck Haddad's study of the symbolic importance of women to modern Arab history (1985) and Leila Ahmed's writing on Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and Yemen (1982), demonstrate the different uses of women as symbols of liberation, emancipation or revolution. Afsaneh Najmabadi (1991) discusses the treatment of the 'woman question' as part of nation-building and state formation in Iran, and Naila Kabeer (1991) focuses on the impact of Islamization of the state in Bangladesh on the women and women's movement. Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi (1993) points to the crucial symbolism of women's role, for all their invisibility in the power-structures of the nation, in anti-colonial wars and resistance movements in Egypt. The shaping of female Muslim identity in India is the subject of analysis by Amrita Chhachhi (1991) which she situates in the interplay of state ideology, economic development, and indigenous cultural mainstream traditions.

The containment of women's potentialities and aspirations into a sanctioned female nature thus becomes the axis of the Islamic order hung on a pyramidal structure of gendered authority and segregated space which demands defence through anathematisation of innovation, flexibility and diversity. But scholars like Mernissi would argue that Islamic orthopraxy lays itself open to the dialectics of historical innovation (Mernissi, 1996:109–120; see also Janet Bauer, 1997).

Defending Innovation

The case made by reformist Muslim thinkers is best characterised by a 'hierarchisation' of Koranic values which distinguishes between socioeconomic and ethic-religious categories (this analysis is based on Stowasser, 1987:294). In the socio-economic category of *mu'amalat* (social relations) the contingency of time and space informs religious organisation, authority, and the legitimate 'conduits' of sacred authoritative pronouncements, and it is here, the central locus of patriarchal prerogatives and values, that social change must be located (see the work of Leila Ahmed, 1992; M. Lazreg, 1990; Fatima Mernissi, 1975, 1991, 1996; Al-Hibri, 1982).

In the ethic-religious category of *'ibadat* (religious duties towards God) resides the dimension of immanence in which women appear as equal in the promise of original soteriology, whether in access to rites of worship or in contemplation of God (see the work of Amina Wadud-Muhsin, 1993; Fatima Mernissi, 1996; Riffat Hassan, 1991). These reformers, in arguing the principle

of a oneness of spirituality beyond gender, assert the supremacy of transcendent values, of an unconditional equality which cancels out conflicting value systems. In this claim, liberation attained through a true understanding of the spirit of the Koran, rather than a literal reading of its time-bound expression, enables the most complete attainment of women's (all humanity's) liberation.

Within this school of thought, the concept of *bid'a* serves to ensure the preservation of ultimate meanings of revelations, otherwise threatened by patriarchal and other temporal self-interests. Where obstacles seem at times insurmountable, Al-Hibri maintains, the Muslim *umma* needs to remind itself of the inevitability, and desirability, of changes in that they express an evolving human capacity of comprehension of the divine. Quoting Mahmasani, she states, "'It cannot be denied that laws change as times and places change'", and she continues, '[This principle] was applied repeatedly in the past, and should be put again to good use' (Al-Hibri, 1982:219; conservative Muslim thinkers however are equally adamant in demonstrating the 'elasticity' of Islam in their interpretations, see Hamidullah, 1992). According to Al-Hibri, we need to allow for distinctions between Islam, Islamic tradition and culture to help replace literal readings of dead traditionalism with a debate over the nature of relevant tradition.

Roots of the Problem

Different writers bring different explanations for the status of women in Muslim societies. Thinkers such as Nawal El Saadawi (particularly in her early writing, i.e. 1982), Riffat Hassan (1991) and Fatima Mernissi (most recently, 1996) stress the consequences of patriarchal readings of the sacred sources of Islam on the spirituality and religious consciousness of women. Lack of self-esteem coupled with lack of theological education make women easy prey to manipulation at every level of society and religious organisation. As Wadud-Muhsin (1993) recognises in her exegesis of the Koranic account of creation, 'no specific cultural functions or roles are defined at the moment of creation' (1993:26) allocating no original sin to woman and no special account of punishment and gendered damnation. But she discovers '*essential* distinctions between men and women reflected in creation, capacity and function in society, accessibility to guidance (particularly to Qur'anic guidance), and in the rewards due to them in the Hereafter' (Ibid: 79, italics in text). The essentialised nature of social function of women reflects women's lack of voice in the interpretations and formulations of authoritative texts which derive their legitimacy from claims to authentic genealogy. Wadud-Muhsin warns that it is women, not the text, who

must be held ‘voiceless’ (Ibid: 2).

Rigidity of Islam in its responses to destabilising and unpredictable social and cultural, national and international transformations, engender fear of innovation, thus argue writers like Moghadam (1993) and Mernissi (1996:112–113). This in turn results in pressure for overriding social consensus and submission to religious and social authority and helps to perpetuate the subordination of women on which patriarchy is predicated.

Critical analyses are directed also at the legitimacy of claims that Islam brought about progressive changes in the legal and social standing of women. In an early study, Saadawi (1982) maintains that pre-feudal, nomadic Arabic society was more respectful of women’s status than Islamic society. Women’s relatively high prestige, status and recognition and their valued economic contributions to society were eroded in the process of social and economic transformation towards feudal society with its features of land-ownership, social stratification and class-based order. This theme was taken up later in another book in which she maintains that pre-Islam religion encouraged diversity and tolerance, whereas the monotheistic Islam introduced hierarchy, intolerance, and misogyny. ‘This shift from a polytheistical system to monotheism went very much hand in hand with the evolution of slavery, class and patriarchy’ (Saadawi, 1990:3). Equally, Jane Smith (1985) focuses on the implications of Islamic masculinisation of deities in terms of women’s religious participation, in contrast to pre-Islamic religion which had known both male and female priestesses. But her most persuasive argument sees Islam as having continued and built on existing patriarchal structures which excluded women from participation in the societal realm; in other words, the founders of Islam enforced rules of segregation in a culture already segregated.

Al-Hibri (1982) and Mernissi (1991) present a different case. Al-Hibri addresses herself to the question as to whether Islam challenged or exploited existing patriarchy by demonstrating the liberating message of the revelations. She foregrounds the Prophet’s progressive, if ultimately abortive, attempt to place women on an equal footing. Progressive (early) Islam replaced pre-Islamic autocratic feudalism and in turn was defeated by reactionary forces. Factional power interests soon overshadowed and muted the early revolution in social and sexual relations. Feminist scholarship thus faces the duty of disentangling progressive Koranic revelations from post-Prophet developments which ultimately reasserted a socio-sexual status quo. Mernissi also presents Islam as a liberating and enlightened force which was re-appropriated by an embattled patriarchy. A revolutionary phase turned into the phase of consolidation and competition for legitimate succession to the Prophet. The Prophet had fought

superstitions inherited from feudal times, including taboos on female sexuality, but this enlightened message was lost in the maze of predominantly conservative and misogynist Hadiths.

The outlined positions and interpretations of the impact of Islam on women's rights have given rise to different analyses and strategies aimed at shifting and re-positioning demarcations of gender relations in a reflection and demonstration of women's growing voice, and interest, in discourses on religious reform.

Recovering Religion for Women

A necessary precursor for women's active intervention in organised religion is the recovery of aspirations and ideals of the original phase of Islamic society and recognition of women's valued place in a refurbished collective memory, according to Fatima Mernissi (1991). Thus a careful exegesis of theological sources serves to highlight the opportunism of temporal political and patriarchal interests as, for example, in Mernissi's dismantling of popular Hadiths based on Abu Bakra's authority, which warn of women's contamination of (men's) political affairs (Mernissi, 1991:49–81). Similar strategies of identification and demolition of misogyny and androcentrism in Islamic scriptures are a feature of Raffat Hassan's scholarship (1991). Saadawi's work argues that only access to modern education and full religious knowledge will enable all women to counter the negative images of women in theological texts with their own understanding of alternative readings of the message of Islam (1982, 1990).

Koranic revelations themselves are subject to careful exegesis for the cultural specificities and the process by which they became universalised to pronounce on essentialised distinctions between men and women. For example, Wadud-Muhsin finds that 'no specific cultural functions or roles are defined at the moment of creation' (1993:26). Moreover, the Koran uses 'the Arabic dual form to tell how they [Adam and Eve] both disobeyed. In maintaining the dual form, the Qur'an overcomes the negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation' (1993:24–25).

Wadud-Muhsin's hermeneutic model of analysis distinguishes between grammar (how the text is written), the context of revelation, and the ***Weltanschauung*** of the text to arrive at her thesis that whereas Arabic grammar makes gender distinctions for the sake of communicative clarity, it must be a guiding principle that these gendered concepts are transcended by the universality of the Islamic ***Weltanschauung*** (1993:3–7).

Gender re/presentations

The case for innovation from within Islam through inspiration from early female role models is made, among others, in the work of Saadawi (1982), Schimmel (1982), Margaret Smith (1928) and Ascha (1995). Saadawi argues that the Prophet's progressive treatment of the woman's question testifies to women's important role in pre-Islamic society, 'The first goddess of knowledge was Eve, later to be succeeded by the Pharaonic Isis' (1980:211–212). Schimmel and Smith reconstruct the role of women saints, teachers and mentors in the mystical tradition of Sufism as exemplifying the very embodiment of purity of faith. Early women saints achieved the freedom to cultivate spirituality through their choice of celibacy and monastic life, not possible in orthodox Islam (Margaret Smith, 1928:165–175; see also Puttick & Clarke, 1993, discussed in Chapter I). These early women saints, some recognised as such even before the rise of Sufism, were venerated as perfect beings by men and women, thus transcending gender boundaries and essentialised notions of gendered human nature. 'In the spiritual life there could be "neither male nor female'" (Smith, 1928:1).

Ascha (1995) argues that throughout the course of Islamic history representations of the Prophet's wives, in particular of Aisha, by successive generations of writers served to justify different standpoints, both conservative and feminist in persuasion. Not their lives themselves or the historical authenticity of the texts are at issue, Ascha maintains, instead we need to ask what motivation shaped the agendas of those who approached these texts: 'Each period has its own "Mothers of the Believers", according to the prevailing cultural and moral values and social norms. Thus, the Prophet's wives do not derive their importance from their historical personalities, but from the continuous modifications, retouchings and modernizations which these personalities have undergone' (Ascha, 1995:107). These role models have served both as source of essentialised domesticated femininity and of innovative critical feminist re-reading, pointing to the open-endedness of the original sources from which conservatism and innovation alike are derived.

The Uses of Women in Islamic Political Culture

When Helie-Lucas (1993) draws out the implications of women's symbolic functions in the 'unconscious' of the nation, she draws attention to the nature of obstacles posed for women seeking to extricate themselves from demands by the community on their sentiments, loyalties and solidarity. Because of the interconnectedness of values symbolised in, and embodied by, women the danger to any given value is perceived as threat to the survival and integrity of the whole political organism. 'This inviolability is reinforced by the deliberate

confusion maintained between the concepts of race (or ethnicity), religion, and nationality (or community)' (Helie-Lucas, 1993:210). At issue is not the nature of Islam (its intrinsic oppressive or liberating potential), but the way religion has been appropriated to validate particular essentialised constructs of femininity to function as what Helie-Lucas calls the 'national or communal cement' (Ibid: 217) in the ideological processes of collective identity formation.

One of the most critical voices belongs to Leila Ahmed. Her writing (1982, 1992) demonstrates how Muslim women have served as a symbolic coinage not only in volatile international transactions between East and West, but also internally between competing social and political movements, to represent the causes of modernity, liberation, and revolution and, equally emphatically, their binary opposites, traditionalism, backwardness, and inertia. Ahmed shows how a multiplicity of national discourses have shaped specific uses of women: in the context of Turkey's modernisation of the state its hallmark was the liberation of women from *hijab*. In Algeria, the discourse on women's rights became an integral part of the clash between Islamic traditionalism and anti-French colonialism. In Egypt, women have been wedged into an uneasy discourse between the state and the mosque, loyalty to the nation and aspirations to join modernity. In Yemen, however, the secular model offered by its brand of state-steered socialism became the sole avenue to affirmation of women's worth (Ahmed, 1982).

Nayereh Tohidi's work on Iran in which women are shown to exert increasing influence on the exegesis and interpretation of the Koran (1994) and Zahra Kamalkhani's study of the rising status of female preachers in Iran (1993) continue the argument in an early study by William Darrow (1985) in which he maintains that in post-1979 Iran women no longer face the question of women's rights, but the question of implementation of these rights. In contrast, Haideh Moghissi (1993) concludes that throughout their history Iranian women have been inscribed as domestic caretakers by the populist leftist wing as well as Islamic traditionalists, with both claims rooted in Islamic culture.

In continuing the themes outlined in this overview of significant international debates between women and Islamic patriarchy with our presentation of the Chinese treatment of innovation, we position our work within the argument of Helie-Lucas (1993): namely, that in order for Muslim women to define and defend their interest, in order to learn to take advantage of diverse traditions of innovative religious praxis, they must first understand the cultural diversification to which Islamic thought and institutions have been exposed (generating diverse Muslim cultures). Helie-Lucas suggests that discovery of multiple traditions of Islam, their diverse applications and realisations at personal and institutional

level, and within these contexts the multiplicity of blueprints for ideal Muslim womanhood, will perform an educational function by de-essentialising Islam, giving rise in turn to the possibility of women's intervention (agency) and participation in the shaping of their own religious culture.

How the Muslim community in China came to understand the function of *bid'a* in Islam as a strategy of communal survival, how it came to be linked in its implementation to a cautious institutionalisation of women's religious progress, must be seen against a specific historical and national context which shaped its identity as Chinese, Hui and Muslim, that is, as members of an ethnic and religious minority with a long tradition of volatile co-existence with its host society (Chapters II, III, IV). Only recently, by beginning to uncover the history of women's complex negotiations of personal and social engagement and participation in religious praxis, have certain commonalties with the historical experience of Muslim women elsewhere become apparent; at the same time, we have been made to realise how Chinese women may look back at a history uniquely and saliently different.

Recovering Chinese Muslim Women from Invisibility

The history of women in the Chinese Islamic diaspora has been, at least until recently, largely unacknowledged and even now only barely documented. It is indeed a 'much neglected area of research' as Dru Gladney remarked in a recent state of the field coverage of China's Islam in *The Journal of Asian Studies* (1995:374). Investigation in the area of religion and gender in China has tended almost entirely to foreground gender in the context of Confucianist, Daoist and Buddhist studies (see Guisso, 1981; Ames, 1981; Overmyer, 1991; Tsai, 1981, 1995). Islam has only recently begun to invite attention.

Barbara Pillsbury published an early study of Muslim women (1978) which, however, views Muslim women in mainland China from a distance (Taiwan), then unable to conduct fieldwork in China proper. More recently, Francois Aubin's project, and scholars associated with her, important here are Elisabeth Alles, Constance-Helene Halfon and Leila Cherif, have so far presented only a fragmentary picture of women's contemporary place in Chinese Islam with an emphasis on Northwest Muslim culture (see in *Etudes Orientates*, 1994; Alles, 1994).

Discussion of relevant scholarship must make reference to Dru Gladney's important study of Muslim ethnic identity in China (1991, 1996). But his framework of investigation does not incorporate the distinctive, gendered Islamic culture as it evolved in Central China, especially in Henan (which has

the third-largest Hui population in China, constituting nearly 98 per cent of the Muslim population in Henan). The anthropologist Kong-Feng Pang (1997), who has conducted important ethnographic work among Muslim women on Hainan Island in Southern China, has begun to publish findings which suggests the positive impact of a resurgence of fundamental Islamic values for women's claims to economic and political rights but, as we argue above (Chapter I), they do not scrutinise the internal constitution of organised Islam.

The following reconstruction of women's presence in official Chinese Hui historiography serves to reclaim and re-appraise a part of Muslim memory which relates to women's contribution to their community in actively keeping alive its faith and a divided identity in exile from its roots in the land and culture of the Prophet.

II.2 Discourses on Exiled Faith, Besieged Memory and Women as Catalysts of Change

What positions are Muslim women expected to occupy in family, society and religious life? How should they conduct themselves in society and family? How should they live their religious faith in their present life, and how prepare for afterlife? Muslim scholars in different times have responded in different ways to these questions. Most significant and of greatest impact were the deliberations by scholars in the Qing Dynasty. They explained Islamic doctrines in terms of accessible traditional Chinese cultural conceptions, theorised about social order and women's position, and formulated ethical criteria and modes of behaviour for Muslim women to follow. Their theory combined with cultural environmental influences have inscribed Chinese Muslim life in Central China until today by allowing for cautious reform, enabling innovation, women's mosques, through which two traditions would evolve: a faithful transmission of static ideas of segregated womanhood; and a dynamic recent development through which segregation became women's strategy of self-determination and eventual independence.

Good and Virtuous, Refined and Pious (*xianshu qiancheng*) – The Ideal Womanly Paradigm

Wang Daiyu (ca. 1584–1670), Ma Zhu (1640–1711) and Liu Zhi (ca. 1655–1745), scholars of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, have been chosen for their great and enduring influence on the construct of the ideal Muslim woman in the Islamic diaspora in Central China.

(1) Wang Daiyu: On the Confucian duties of a Muslim woman

Wang Daiyu's main works include *Zhengjiao Zhenquan*, *Qingzhen Daxue*, and *Xizhen Zhengda* (reprinted in 1988). His concept of women and men was buttressed by borrowings from Daoist and Confucian ethical systems. Wang argued for the righteousness of the Islamic concept of a couple's mutual rights and obligations in reference to the traditional Chinese theory of *taiji* (the idea of the Absolute in Chinese philosophy) and *yin* and *yang*, and he defined Muslim women's position in the secular world in line with Confucian ethics of the whole duty of man (*sangang wuchang*): the three cardinal guides: ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife, and the five constant virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity, which defined contemporary Chinese society. Second, he formulated religious requirements and day-to-day Islamic regulations for pious women.

The idea of *taiji* results from the ancient Chinese knowledge of, and philosophical thinking about, the origin of the universe and its law of movement. Based on the theory of *taiji* put forward by Zhou Dunyi (Northern Song Dynasty, 1017–1073), Wang explains the ideal of social order in Islamic doctrine. According to Zhou Dunyi, *taiji* was born from *wuji*, the highest form of spirituality and nothingness. *Taiji* is the unity of the two vital energies called *yin* and *yang*, the root of the world, the universe-in-itself and the source of everything in the world. Zhou Dunyi constructed his *renji* theory on the basis of the *taiji* theory. Characterised by 'neutrality, benevolence, righteousness, and thorough quietude', *renji* is regarded as the highest ethical standard for humankind, the paragon of all creation. Continuing from this philosophical and ethical foundation, Wang Daiyu develops his own theory. According to him, *wuji* 'is the origin of conjugality (*nai fufu zhi shi*)', and therefore the origin of *renji*. 'The beginning of *wuji* and the source of *taiji* refer to the state in which the human is not distinguished sexually. *Renji* refers to the spiritual state of this sexually undifferentiated human being' (Wang Daiyu, *Zhengjiao Zhenquan*: 67). God opened the gates for the creation of humanity by first endowing it with spirituality (*wuji*), a spirituality which forms the common and indivisible source of all humans, and then refining its material and visible form (*taiji*), through which two sexes emerged, together with all other material things which came into being in the world. By arguing that God positions men and women in the same sacred origin, one would have expected the author to continue to conclude with an argument of their full equal worth. However, Wang Daiyu turned the relationship between husband and wife into the corner stone of a different social order. 'When the human equals humanity, that is *renji*. Through its division

appear husband and wife. *Renji* is originally one being, while husband and wife are two beings. One being represents the human, two represent humanity. The ethical code of *sangang wuchang* which defines the relationship between the sovereign and his official, between father and son, is based on the fundamental relationship between husband and wife' (*Zhengjiao Zhenquan*: 64).

When he approved *sangang wuchang*, the moral code defined by Confucianism, Wang did not explicate the contradiction between the Islamic theory of shared human origin and the deeply gendered code of ethics defined by late Ming/Qing Confucian scholars. Instead a potentially liberating theology was submerged into a highly asymmetrical social ethics, and it became a sanctioned tradition that Muslim women, designed by God to be the equal of man, must be strictly confined to the family and subordinate to their husbands. They 'are not allowed to see close relatives other than their parents, uncles, and brothers after reaching the age of ten'. Furthermore, 'After marriage, a woman ought not to leave the house of her husband until her death. Even if her parents are seriously ill, she dares not pay them a visit without her husband's permission' (*Zhengjiao Zhenquan*: 68). This came to be the prescribed behaviour pattern a Muslim woman was expected to follow in her appropriate domestic sphere.

In matters of societal conduct, Wang Daiyu adjusted Muslim life style to Confucian standards, but religion was shaped by the principles of Islam. Far away from the home land, ignorant of lived Islamic praxis in an Arabic context, Chinese Muslims based their understanding of Islam on the canons and traditions of interpretations passed on from early times. The great Muslim women who lived during the Prophet's time inspired early Muslim scholars to formulate influential ideas about the nature of femininity. They set a unique path for Muslim women which allowed for development in the religious field as society was closed to them.

Wang Daiyu invoked the authority of the Prophet when he asserted that 'It is God's order that every Muslim, male and female, must learn'. To follow the right way in study was *zhengxue*, defined as 'never pretending to be clever or follow one's desires, but respect and obey the scripture as one's ancestor and Islam as one's mother'. One has to give up personal desires totally to follow the Islamic doctrines in every way. 'According to Islam, every one should study continuously regardless of gender, identity or age. Benevolence knows no limits, neither does one's benevolent behaviour' (Wang Daiyu, *Zhengjiao Zhenclman*: 75). The search for truth should not be ignored by anyone, regardless of sex and age. To emphasise the importance of learning, Wang Daiyu interpreted the Islamic theory of filial piety or devotion to mean that 'According to the glorious Islamic religion, five behaviours are considered to violate the Islamic doctrines,

of which *jue hou* (literally, to be cut off from posterity, the meaning here is to cut oneself off from spiritual future) is the worst. The five behaviours are: first, not to believe in God; second, to fail to follow the example of the saints; third, not to esteem persons of lofty and noble character; fourth, not to engage in pursuit of livelihood [as to care for the family]; fifth, not to study or learn … here, *jue hou* does not mean to have no son. It means to lose the chance of learning'. Wang borrowed familiar Confucian terms to convey the importance of knowledge. 'When one learns, even if not arriving at great accomplishments in the future, one can at least better oneself. Those who are famous for being most accomplished will let others draw the benefit from their learning. Their names will go down in history and people will remember them even after their death. Thus a learned person is forever respected and becomes immortal. If a son receives no education, he will bear no belief in God and gives no filial obedience to his parents, not knowing of the Prophet's instructions. Ignorant of the [Islamic] law, he is likely to commit crimes and bring about disgrace and bad luck to his own family. Such a person is as good as dead. To have a son like that is to have none at all' (*Zhengjiao Zhenquan*: 92). Women gained immense benefits for their religious developments from the pivotal functions of learning and knowledge in the spiritual, moral and social realm of Muslim life.

Through enriching Chinese culture with Islamic meanings, Wang Daiyu established Islamic scholarship in Chinese intellectual tradition. Scholars in later times praised him as 'having discovered what earlier scholars could not, and as having said what others dared not say. Thus he made great contributions to Islam and added to its glory' (Jin Jitang, quoted in Li Xinghua & Feng, 1985:583). His religious and social theories on the nature of Muslim women set the premise from which later scholars, such as Ma Zhu and Liu Zhi, could develop their contributions to the construct of the Chinese Muslim woman.

(2) Ma Zhu: Educating Yin

Ma Zhu was one of the initiators of a Chinese Islamic corpus of intellectual thought; his major work *Qingzhen Zhinan* (The Compass of Islam, 1988 reprint) exerted great influence on later generations. In his theories on the spiritual and social constitution of women, Ma Zhu followed in Wang Daiyu's footsteps when he embedded Islamic principles in the culture of Confucian social relations.

Ma Zhu further defined and refined ideas on conjugal relations, and provided detailed explanations on the noble attributes of males and debased nature of females. This led him to rationalise the ideal society in which men oversee public affairs and women tend to domestic matters as the husband's helpmate.

Ma contented that the wife should be inspired by the first human couple, Adan and Haowa [Adam and Eve]. ‘When Adan first came into being, he was troubled and unhappy. However, when Haowa was created, his calm spirits were restored’. Although sharing the same bones and tissues, since Haowa was made from one of Adan’s ribs, the couple could not be equal in standing. Ma Zhu concluded that ‘Husband and wife are one entity. [However], created out of her husband, the wife should naturally obey him. Their love is locally described as dear as that between brothers and sisters’ (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 38).

Ma Zhu also gave new additional explanations for the concepts of *yin* and *yang.* ‘*Ming* refers to what is innate, and is preordained by God, whereas *xing* refers to what is acquired [through social conditioning] after birth’. Ma continues, ‘That which is innate belongs to *yang*, that which is acquired belongs to *yin*; the former is spiritual while the latter is material. … thus *ming* is spiritual but the physical body is corrupted; when the two are combined, that is to say, when *yin* and *yang* join together, sexually distinguished [gendered] human beings are born’ (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 90). Ma Zhu’s conception of male character, represented by *yang* and denoting sacredness and nobility, contrasted with the female, the worldly and debased nature of *yin*, adding sacred dimension to indigenous cultural notions of a gendered heaven and earth.

In the opinion of Ma Zhu, while both male and female were born from the combination of *yin* and *yang*, the male was mainly composed of *yang* while the female was mostly composed of *yin*. ‘The male has more resemblance to his father than to his mother, so he loves purity and *yang*, but hates corruption and *yin*. He is able to follow the good and avoid the bad. Originated from the pure granted to him by God, he is able to wake from the indulgence of physical pleasures, and be conscious and regretful of his own wicked thoughts and misconduct’. A man, constituted of all that is good and pure, could turn his back on sinful conduct through acknowledgement and penitence. The worldly desires all belonged to *yin*. Those who pursue physical pleasures ‘are made of too much *yin* and too little *yang*.’ With their hearts pulsating in pursuit of wickedness, these people can never enter paradise. The case with women was different however. Born of *yin*, their debasement was natural. ‘The attributes of the female, resembling more her mother than her father, makes her greedy, anxious for wealth and contemptuous of poverty; she likes a comfortable home and hates to move; once indulged in physical pleasures she will neglect to do good. Contaminated with the corrupted element by birth, women tend to be hesitant when they should be active, they are greedy when confronted with benevolence. They remain unaffected when confronted with disasters and misfortunes. Pampered by physical comforts they incline to be muddle-headed, and how can

one see clearly if peering into a mirror in dim light' (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 90). According to Ma Zhu, all of women's weaknesses, such as to love the rich but detest the poor, to seek after physical comforts, be muddleheaded and unable to tell the good from the evil, are due to their corrupted nature. Women are thus easily tempted by *yibulisi* (the devil), and good men must avoid listening to women's opinions; a woman must instead submit to her husband. Only by a wholehearted devotion to God, and ceaseless repentance of their errors, could women hope to 'gain more *yang*, fight their weaknesses' and thus avert a fate in hell.

Whilst Wang Daiyu regarded *yin* and *yang* as the dual nature of *taiji*, he never classified and ranked them into noble and debased. Obviously, he was influenced by certain Daoist theories which stressed the equal value of *yin* and *yang*. However, Ma Zhu's thinking mirrored more closely Confucian ideas on the hierarchical structuring of sexual relations which set the male unambiguously above the female.

Yet the outcome of Ma Zhu's pessimistic appraisal of women's innate nature was his call to Muslim women to better themselves through acquisition of knowledge. What is more, he suggested that a woman who had thus acquired excellent understanding and moral character would be considered superior to a man. Citing Islamic traditions in which are recorded the deeds and positions of outstanding Muslim women in history (these traditions placed four famous women in equal position with four saints and as role models for all Muslims), Ma Zhu stressed the potential and capabilities of such great women (*Qingzhen Zhinan*:123). For example, Axiye (Chinese translation), an early Muslim, devoted herself totally to the worship of God and looked death calmly in the face, thus illustrating how 'a woman's wisdom is superior to that of a man' (*Qingzhen Zhinan*: 143). Moleyan (Chinese translation) was obedient to God though she was trapped in poverty. Khadiyah, the Prophet's first wife, used her wealth to relieve the poor. The Prophet's daughter Fatima donated what little she had to the poor. These great women demonstrated for Ma Zhu the possibility of change for all women, though born disadvantaged by nature. If they worked hard to be pious, they would be able to enter paradise. He explained that 'Anything perfect belongs to God, while all that is debased belongs to the human realm. What belongs to God is inborn and everything else is human and free. There is no distinction of sex in essential nature. *Yin* and *yang* are composed of the free elements … with more *yang*, a woman can be superior to a man; while a man may be inferior to a woman when dominated by the element of *yin'* (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 407). As long as a woman worked hard to deepen her knowledge of Islam and improve her disposition, she could also aspire to

superiority over men. By implication, a man indulging himself with worldly pleasures and letting himself be ruled by *yin*, became a woman born with evil proclivities. This theory allowed Ma to re-interpret the saying that 'hell is purely female (*diyu chun shi furen*)'. Ma Zhu explained: '*Dunya* is what is lowest and most corrupt in the world [such as pursuit of money, physical indulgence, women…]. Countless heroes in history have been destroyed because they cannot resist its temptations and have indulged themselves in physical pleasures. Thus these men are called women. All those who follow the female path are led to a bad fortune, and are thus called women (*zong wei furen*). This is why we say that hell is set up for women. … [but] if a woman is superior to a man, how could there be a reason not to accept her into paradise?' (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 399). According to Ma Zhu, those men who could be classified as women would end up in hell. In this light, the saying that 'hell is purely female' is not an exclusive condemnation of women but rather of all those (women and men) whose yearning for *dunya* (secular delights) removed them from the pleasures of paradise.

On the one hand, Ma Zhu emphasised innate differences between women and men and situated women firmly in the sphere of the family. He stressed that 'even a talented woman should not take care of non-domestic affairs'; that 'a talented woman takes pride in depending on her husband', and that a woman 'must adhere to God's instructions, be obedient to her husband, and conduct herself properly' (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 226). On the other hand, Ma approved of the talents of excellent women, and he considered that women had the right to dissuade their husbands from doing evil. 'If a man does not obey God, his wife should tell him not to do so'. Ma Zhu, whilst stressing women's responsibility to obey, did qualify this in the case of a husband's violation of Islamic doctrine.

In summary, Ma Zhu theorised and justified the spiritual and social inequality of the sexes expanding on the idea of men's nobility and women's subordination because of the lesser quality of their inborn nature. Yet he also praised the talents of great women in Islamic history, encouraging women to take the initiative and open up for themselves the gate of learning, and thus of paradise. When Ma Zhu asserted that 'Men and women should keep learning until they die' (Ma, *Qingzhen Zhinan*: 146), he strengthened women's case for education.

(3) Liu Zhi: From Three Obediences to One Obedience

The third thinker, Liu Zhi, systematically defined a Muslim code of conduct on the basis of a fusion of Islamic doctrines with *sangang wuchang*, the ethical code which orders Confucian society. In his 'Five Rites (*wudian*)' Liu Zhi says: 'The

five rites are divine and immutable. They are to be observed by the sovereign and his official, by father and son, husband and wife, brothers and friends'. Liu Zhi placed greatest emphasis on the relations between husband and wife and provided detailed interpretation of an ideal code of conduct for Muslim women. Whilst Liu Zhi agreed with the Islamic principle of equality between men and women, he confined women's position in the family with reference to Confucian precepts enshrined in the Three Obediences (*sancong*: to father, husband, and son) and Four Virtues (*side*: virtuous behaviour, proper speech, proper demeanour, proper employment) which defined all Chinese women, leaving women totally passive in secular life. And yet, like Ma Zhu, Liu Zhi also encouraged women to strive for development in the religious sphere. It was his view that 'a man is a-thousand times worthier than a woman, but a virtuous woman is a-thousand times worthier than a man' (1984 reprint, *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu*, 1710:318), shifting the burden of proof on the women themselves. This influential view played a positive role in Central Chinese Muslim culture to support and encourage Muslim women to develop their personal capacities.

In his work *Tianfang Dianli*, completed in 1710, Liu Zhi sought to present a comprehensive moral code for men and women. He shared with other Islamic scholars a flexible approach to the borrowing from Confucian sexual morality which he felt served the purpose of genuine Muslim family life. Children were to be raised with equal concern to well-being and spiritual life, regardless of their sex. Liu Zhi emphasised that the sex of a new-born baby was decided by God, thus both should be treated and brought up without discrimination. It was not right to prefer boys over girls, '…parents follow God's will when they bring children into this world, is this not the case? So all children should be treated in the same way regardless of their sex or their mental faculties'. And elsewhere Liu exhorts his readers, 'Don't be overjoyed at bearing a son and disappointed at a daughter. Whether a boy or a girl is born is decided by God' (*Tianfang Dianli*, 1710:124). Liu Zhi thought that if a parent disapproved of a female child, this parent was actually disapproving of God. Generally, preference for a boy had to do with inheritance through the male line, leading to a popular stance that it was more profitable to raise a boy than to raise a girl. Liu Zhi refuted this as shorted-sighted and supported his argument with many references to rich families which had come down in the world because of a son, never because of a daughter. 'One should not think that with a son one has nothing to worry about, or with a daughter one has nobody to rely on. What is more, the sex of a child is preordained. It will not change in line with one's preference. Keep in mind that it is God who has arranged for the baby's sex, and welcome both boys and girls to

your family. Then you will find peace in your mind' (Liu, 1988 reprint, *Tianfang Dianli*, 1710:124).

Liu Zhi defined the ethic for Muslim women as One Obedience (*yicong*: obedience to husband after marriage) and Four Virtues (see above). As Islam paid special attention to the marital relationship and did not require a woman to obey her son after her husband's death, Liu Zhi placed the husband at the heart of the family, demanding that a woman must obey her husband in all respects. As for Muslim women's self-cultivation, besides setting conventional Confucian criteria, Liu Zhi added one more requirement – religiosity. The rites and rules a Muslim woman must learn include 'memorising the Islamic doctrine, the ritual prayers, and the schedule for keeping fast; she must also attend upon the parents-in-law, work hard to spin and weave, feed the children and take care of all domestic affairs' (Liu, *Tianfang Dianli*, 1710:116). So a woman was limited to the family, her major task to see to the domestic affairs. She must not entice her husband with superficial beauty and instead cultivate inner virtues of selflessness, self-abnegation, complacency, reticence, discretion as well as endurance and patience during times of hardship.

Within this framework of conjugal harmony, erected by Confucian moral precepts and sanctified by selective Islamic interpretation, women's submission to their husbands was underwritten by multiple authority. 'A woman must make great efforts to show her respect to her husband by doing what her husband says; by following her husband's instructions; by never going out without her husband's permission; by seeing no non-kin male (*wainanren*); and never going against any of her husband's requirements'. A woman must be obedient to her husband in all aspects, and even if he was wrong, she should not disobey him. She could only fall back on gentle persuasion. If he remained unresponsive, she had to patiently wait for another chance. Not even the most dire and unjust situation could justify an act of dissent. Liu Zhi conceptualised marriage as shaped and controlled by the husband with the wife positioned as a subordinate.

Furthermore, Liu equated the husband's superiority with the superiority of God. The husband's authority thus assumed a divine quality directly derived from God, in this sacred chain of command, any disobedience was tantamount to sacrilege. 'A woman should respect her husband's wishes. What her husband likes is what God approves of and what he dislikes is disapproved of by God'. Liu Zhi buttressed this position on the relationship between husband and God in the following way: 'God has revealed his preference in the husband's superiority. When a woman sees what her husband likes and dislikes, she knows that is what God loves and hates … God loves obedience and hates disobedience. A man will love or hate according to his wife's obedience or disobedience, God's love or

hatred is mirrored in the man's preferences. Therefore, when a woman sees what it is her husband wants she knows it is what God wants. Here the judgement is not on the man's behaviour but on the woman's obedience or disobedience' (*'Tianfang Dianli*, 1710:119). By deifying a husband's authority through the man's special and direct relationship with God, obedience or disobedience assumed a dimension which stretched into afterlife, repercussions shaping the very prospect of paradise or hell. Women were thus stripped of agency and held in submission by the twin forces of cultural and religious orthodoxy. Though Liu insisted a marital relationship must be tempered by love and tolerance, the initiative and authority rested with the husband, leaving the wife in a passive, helpless and unequal position.

Fifteen years after the printing of *Tianfang Dianli*, Liu Zhi completed his translation of the *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu* (ca. 1725; reprinted in 1984), in which some changes in his constructs of conjugality and womanhood can be detected. Women's ethic is discussed under the topic of 'husband and wife', and the criteria listed for women's behaviour are basically the same as those put forward in the earlier work. But of import is the notion he presents that while 'man is a-thousand times worthier than woman, a virtuous woman is a-thousand times worthier than a man'. Women, at least a virtuous woman, were no longer in all aspects inferior to men. Liu Zhi translated and edited the *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu* on the basis of *Zhisheng Lu* (Records of the Prophet's Life), an Arabic (or Persian) text that had been preserved in Zhuxia*nzhen* in Henan. In this work, Liu included the life stories of outstanding Muslim women such as Sai Miye, Khadiyah, Aisha, and Zai Nabu. Of importance for Liu Zhi were the following details from their lives: the first Muslim convert was a woman, the Prophet's wife Kahdiyah (*Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu*: 117–118); the first Muslim *shexide* (*shaheeda* in Arabic, martyr) was a woman, Sumayyah Uram Aramar, known as Sai Miye to Chinese Muslims (see also *Encyclopaedia of Islam in China*, 1994:496); and women facilitated the Prophet's preaching by erecting a platform from which to preach (*Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu*: 130, 133). As for Khadiyah, 'with her wonderful virtues, she is outstanding in her every conduct and sets a model for posterity. In short, she is wonderfully virtuous, knowledgeable, talented, experienced, honest, selfless and tolerant' (*Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu*: 141). Aisha spared no effort in spreading the message of Islam after the death of the Prophet, whereas Zai Nabu expressed her virtue by choosing the Prophet as her husband. These prominent women were superior to many males in talents, moral integrity, experience and capabilities. Liu Zhi had to qualify some of his earlier pronouncements on female nature when he was singing their praise.

Qing Dynasty scholars situated Chinese Muslim women in worldly and

religious spheres. In secular life, women were left almost no space for development beyond the domestic courtyard. However, they were encouraged to develop in religious life. Religious education of women and men was considered equally important, and women's individual accomplishments were valued and acknowledged. Thus an ideal construct of Muslim womanhood emerged which came to influence the shape of religious education in Central China and in turn shaped women's lives with characteristics that made them uniquely different from Muslim women elsewhere in China.

Safeguarding Islam and Modernising Women

Scholars have divided the history of women's education into three periods: the *Jingtang* (religious) Educational Period (pre-20th century), the New Educational Period (1913–1949), and the Contemporary Educational Period (post-1949). They have on the whole stressed the positive part *jingtang* education played in the formation of Hui identity, positioning it also at the beginning of women's education.

Muslim scholars from late Qing to the Republican Period paid attention both to religious and secular education and their relevance to changes in the country and wider international community. Between 1911 to the late 1940s, progressive Hui activists and intellectuals created newspapers and magazines which served the purpose of reform and strengthening of Islam and Muslim culture. According to Lei Xiaojing, 'How to prosper and practice Islamic religion, to bring Islam, after all a religion deeply enmeshed in secular activities, out of a self-imposed confinement, and how to bring the Hui people into the main currents of great social changes in China, all these were the most consistent and distinct themes in the Hui*zu* and Islamic press of this period' (Lei, 1997:17). Particular attention was given to issues concerning Hui*zu* Muslim women and children including Muslim women's level and quality of religious belief, and the development of *nusi* (women's mosques). The Islamic Women's Association in Shanghai published a magazine which was named the *Yisilan Funu Zazhi* (Islamic Women's Magazine). Edited by He Yufen, the magazine came out at irregular intervals and ceased publication after the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War. The Magazine aimed at spreading Muslim culture, a deeper understanding of Islamic doctrine, and the creation of solidarity among Muslim women for their common benefit.

Scholars in this period not only attached importance to investigation and research, but also to action. Many an Islamic scholar and intellectual held classes for women, hoping to raise Muslim women's educational level. At the same

time, the creation of women's mosques in urban and rural communities was encouraged. Unfortunately, little documentation exists on the important educational work of that time (see Appendix IV for unpublished works). Writers include Ding Depu (1934), Ha Xiaoping (1936), and others.

Studies on Muslim women after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 can be divided into two phases. Research before the 1980s subsumed Muslim women under the common identity of Chinese women or of minority women. Little research was done on women in either of their dual identities as Hui nationality or Muslim women. But the all-pervasive secular ideology and policies of the state and its impact on intellectual life and scholarly projects tended to emphasise the study of minority culture as a framework for investigating women's lives rather than religious culture. In other words, women anchored in a Hui minority status were evaluated in relation to the overriding Han paradigm rather than as Muslims with their own values and preferred ways of life (also see Chapter VIII).

Since the 1980s, scholars have continued to focus on the adjustment of Muslim women to modern society making for several observations. (1) Scholars (only excluding local Islamic scholars) generally observe and study Muslim women's problems from the perspectives of sexual equality and secular modernity as defined by the state (see also Chapters VIII, IX). The need for Muslim women to cope with the demands of economic and social development has led to the study of reform of education needed to provide pertinent general knowledge and social status. Religious issues are rarely included in discussions. This neglect of women as Muslim applies to Hui nationality scholars (*neiren*, of the same nationality) as much as to non-Hui scholars. This stands in sharp contrast to scholarship in earlier times.

Ming and Qing scholars were steeped in Confucian classics and Islamic scriptures. Their religious faith informed their scholarship. The women's question was positioned within two overriding concerns: how to raise the spirituality and religious understanding of women and how to raise the level of communal faith and Muslim morality; their great contribution was to see how these two issues were interconnected. Scholars in the Republican Period, equally well versed in Islam, and Muslim intellectuals concerned about the future of the religion, focused their attention on the need for Islamic reform and the women's question against the historical background of Muslim women's religious education in *zhongyuan* culture and the influence of new ideas on women's liberation from the New Cultural Movement. But these scholars also brought to their writing the fundamental perspective of Islamic religion, walking the path opened up by their predecessors. Even the women's movement activist Liu

Qingyang, an early Chinese Communist Party member, claimed that she was a *'huijiaotu* (religious Hui) who dares to acknowledge the truth' (Meng Xianling, 1994:91). In contrast, today's scholars are studying Muslim women in terms of the paradigmatic criterion of modernity: mostly unpublished local Islamic scholarship will ponder religious life in the context of modernising society, the more accessible published essays and works do not reflect perspectives either of religious men or women in the belief that an over-emphasis on religious education may have a negative effect on needful secular education (Qian Zhihe & Chen, 1994). Thus scholars have tended to identify religious faith and the influence of tradition as the factors responsible for the low level of education of Muslim women in the Northwest (see Dai Jianning, 1992). Studies in this field have undoubtedly highlighted important aspects of women's social and cultural predicament, but it would be presenting an incomplete picture of the quest of religious women if we neglect their need for modern, appropriate religious education.

Though not many articles exist on Hui nationality Muslim women, those published cover a wider scope than was the case during the Republican Period. Whilst most research focuses on the education of women and young girls, some scholars have also inquired into Muslim women's social position, religious belief, the historical origins and current situation of *nusi* (women's mosques) and *nuxue* (women's Koranic schools). Additionally, biographies and selected groups of religious women have also become a subject of investigation. Though the images of contemporary Muslim women still remain obscure, they are no longer invisible subjects of history.

(1) Studies on Muslim Women's Education

Though education attracts the greatest attention, this is relative and the actual number of studies is less than impressive. Of importance and relevance are Ding Guoyong's investigation into the education of Hui women in Northwest China (1992, 1996), Ma Wei's work on Hui women's education in Ningxia (1988), Ma Zhong's study of Hui women in Qinghai (1990), and Ma Yaping's study of Hui women's education in Gansu (1996). Other writings on Muslim women's education are scattered in books or essays on the history or the present situation of the Hui nationality.

Ding Guoyong has been heading a major research project on Hui nationality women, 'Studies of Hui Nationality Women's Problems in the Northwest Region' (financed by the National Social Science Fund). Another project concerns 'Research on the Present State of Young Girls' Education in the Rural

Areas, Problems and Solutions' which was the proposal of the Educational Science Research Institute in Ningxia and was carried out as a collaboration between the Academies of Social Sciences in Gansu and Qinghai; the project was listed as one of the state priority projects in the '8th Five-Year-Term Plan'. Its findings were published in 1994 under the title of *Qinghai Minzu Nutong Jiaoyu Yanjiu* (A Study of the Education of Young Girls of Different Nationalities in Qinghai).

(2) Studies on the Social Status of Hui Nationality Women

The social status of women is one of the most frequently studied issues in Chinese women's studies, and research on Hui women is no exception. The main publications include Gao Guiying (1995), whose work looks at Hui women in Ningxia; Gao Zhanfu's research in Gansu (1993), and Nan Wenyuan's studies on Hui women in Xining and Qinghai (1993, 1994).

Researchers' main concern is with women's position in the economic and familial spheres. The influence of contemporary Islamic religion on women's social position, and the relationship between these two, provides for a second theme. On the one hand, researchers confirm the positive role of Islam in the egalitarian and humane treatment demanded for girl children, in the greater openness to divorce and sympathy for divorced and remarried women. On the other hand, these progressive ideas are seen as having succumbed to Confucian cultural accretions. Influenced by the traditional culture of Han China, indigenised Islam is seen as obstructive of women's equal participation and status in society and as compromising female development. Gao Guiying (1995) sees this as one of the major reasons why Muslim women in the Northwest have a low literacy rate, are placed in a less advantageous position in the job market, and occupy relatively low positions in society and family. But scholars also argue for the recognition of the role Islam has played, and a reformed Islam can play, in the improvement of Muslim women's prospects.

(3.a) Treatment of Religious Belief

There are even fewer studies carried out on the subject of faith and piety of Hui Muslim women. Among the few scholars in the field, Nan Wenyuan (1994) provides in his interpretation of religious culture in the Northwest a portrait of women as physically and psychologically dependent, needing to project and entrust their hopes on others. According to Nan, women's implicit faith in God and their religion means that even discrimination against women, as in their perceived lower spirituality, does not offend. On the contrary, God's castigation

of women's weak points is seen as ultimately to work in their best interest as well as providing a proof of the all-mighty power of God. If asked to give up their belief and choose freedom, they would feel perturbed and uneasy. Thus Nan Wenyuan reasons that Islam is good for women by filling them with kindness and love, morality and psychological security. He therefore criticises the view which regards 'stepping out from the family to participate in social activities at large' as the sole criterion of judging women's liberation. Religion has its beneficial effect on women's overall development he concludes.

Dai Jianning's study (1992) presents an argument on the negative impact of Islam on the psychology of Hui women in Northwest China (also see Chapter X): blindly obedient, dependent on patriarchal society and husbands, perfunctory in practising of rites and rules and ignorant of more profound religious truths. They are ruled by fear rather than a genuine understanding of the divine dimension in their lives. It needs adding that the women investigated, living in the most orthodox Muslim cultures, have no access to their own women's mosques and *ahong* in contrast to women in Central China (see Chapter X for discussion of implications for communities without sites of education and worship for women).

(3.b) Ma Ping: Religions Agency of Chinese Women

Exceptional and thus worth treating at greater length is the contribution by the young Hui scholar Ma Ping to an understanding of religious belief in general and, specifically, as related to Chinese Muslims (Ma, 1995). Exploring religion as a basic need of humanity for spiritual fulfilment (as distinct from a secular psychological satisfaction), Ma Ping identifies different aspects of this fulfilment: consolation (*weiji*) for the emptiness felt by those disempowered socially, politically and economically; equilibrium (*pingheng*) under conditions of modernising pressures and pressures felt by those disadvantaged; identity and emotional identification (*qinggan rentong*) for believers in a religious diaspora and conditions of alienation (*guli wuyuan*); the release (*xuanxie*) which religion gives to pent-up frustrations especially strong among members of a disadvantaged minority (1995:87–91).

Rare in Chinese scholarship, Ma acknowledges not only the 'objective' dimension (*keguanxing*) of religion in its collective and social aspect which grants this spiritual strength and equilibrium as an extrinsic factor (*waizaide zuoyong*), but also the intrinsic factor (*neizaide zuoyong*) which Ma sees as the subjective constitution of religion, through which an inner spiritual consolidation can be achieved (1995:91), an autonomy therefore outside the control of external

forces. Belief, so Ma says, may give ‘heroic strength’, identity and sublimation (*xuanxie*) as important devices for the constitution of a subjectivity under threat from disruptive environments. ‘The origin of religion lies in meeting the need of humanity for self-realisation’ (1995:91).

But equally relevant, although there is no explicit mention of gender in Ma’s analysis, this interpretation depends on an underlying premise of stress, alienation and exile. No ‘withering away’ of religion is projected, instead Ma sees humanity as necessarily attached to the spiritual quest for self-realisation. Religion is seen as a source of affirmation, not of weakening by Ma, both in its objective (communal) and subjective (individual) implications. Here Ma goes further than his influential older Hui colleague, Ma Tong (1990), who argues that religion, under the principles of religious self-rule, is no longer the tool of imperialist or class-based oppression and thus may be respected as a private right and part of a heritage of Chinese traditional, particularly minority culture to which protection should be extended. Whereas Ma Tong turns religious faith into a cultural relic worthy of preservation by a state committed to a diversity of cultures, Ma Ping gives it contemporary relevance, defining religious faith as an intrinsic and dynamic element of self-determination, the building-stone of a strong, assertive and autonomous self.

If ‘Muslim’ women are treated not as an essentialised category but as a complex and dynamic reality, then the meaning we ascribe to ‘Islam’ must convey the diversity of lived faith reflecting existential commitment as much as the experience of ‘Otherness’ in Han culture; inflicted as much with labelling of backwardness as developing the determination to find a voice within patriarchal loci of authority.

The discourse to which we seek to make our contribution over criteria of desirable quality of life for women must include those women who straddle different socio-political and ethnic contexts and who see the secular-religious polarity not in mutually exclusive, but in interactive, compatible terms: where, on the one hand, secular values impinge upon expectations for participation in religious authority and, on the other hand, where religious values inform secular praxis.

(4) Research on Qingzhen Nuxue (women’s Koranic schools) and Nusi (women’s mosques)

Only few contemporary scholars have studied women’s religious sites, they include most importantly Shui Jingjun (1996) and Jiang Bo and Wang Xingling (1996). Shui Jingjun’s article mainly discusses the historical origin and evolution

of *nuxue* and *nusi* in the *zhongyuan* region, whereas Jiang Bo and Wang Xiling present a survey of *nuxue* in Linxia, Gansu Province.

(5) Individual and Collective Biographies of Prominent Muslim Women

Work in the area of individual and collective biography has been done by Ma Zhongping (1992), Meng Xianling (1994), and Zhao Hui (1995). This particular line of investigation has only just begun. Ma Zhongping argues that the first translator of religious texts for women was a woman, Ding Yunhui. Meng Xianling introduces the Hui social activist, Liu Qingyang, and Zhao Hui has opened up a new field of research with her interest in Hui women writers and their literary work.

The Uses of Chinese Religious Women in a Secular State

In the growing historiography of indigenous Chinese women's studies the enduring place of religion in women's lives has received scant attention. Although the post-1949 ideological rigidity with which the Communist Party defended its monopoly over women's liberation and salvation has long dissolved under the corrosive impact of a spreading market economy, political weakening of the Centre, popular disenchantment with Communist ideas and ideals, and the assault from pervasive global media messages and with it, faithful representations of women's attainments of equal rights, certain orthodox assumptions have survived. The assumption of an inseparable equation of espousal of secular values with unfettered sexual progress is shared alike by Chinese researchers, writing before the mid-1980s within the loyal framework of the All-China Women's Federation, and by their successors at universities and research institutions, contributing with diverse analyses, methodologies and subject matter, to the corpus of an increasingly diverse indigenous women's studies scholarship (see Frick et al, 1995; Sausmikat, 1995).

Notions of progress and modernity universally underlying Chinese scholarly assumptions, with a few noted exceptions (see below), are uniformly rooted in the Marxist theory that the forces of history must inevitably result in the withering away of religious beliefs and their representative churches (see Christopher Lasch, 1995, for a critique of notions of historical progress in Western thinking, premised equally on rejections of religious belief as a 'dependency' phase suggestive of adolescent immaturity). Only during a period of transition does the socialist stage of development allow for the co-existence of the private right of individuals to believe, with the collective rights of an enlightened populace not to believe, as the Provincial Henan Religious Affairs

Bureau spokesman explained to the local newspaper *Henan Ribao* (10 November 1991), with this policy of mutual non-interference controlled and regulated by the state ensuring effectively a state-facilitated dominance of secular (Communist) values in public discourses on modernity and progressive identity.

Indeed, Chinese scholarship as a whole has placed religion squarely within the paradigm of a 'traditional' and unreconstructed femininity which is still obstructing society's full progress towards sexual equality. In a rigid ideologically-informed equation of economic, social or political backwardness with religious piety, this premise shrinks religion into an object of consumption in a 'market for religion' as testimony to inequalities which continue to mar overall sexual progress. The large female participation in all religious traditions is treated as an indicator of remaining tensions and injustices and, moreover, of new inequalities which women suffer in the wake of modernisation of China's economy (Du Fangqin, 1988:304, writing for the New-Era women's studies series). One influential public speaker on matters of women's education, both closely aligned with the work of the provincial Women's Federation in Henan and a voice for the New-Era gender activism, does not touch upon religious issues in her many speeches throughout the province. Religion is a non-issue for her, *a sirende shi*, 'a private matter', not to be brought into a public forum. As she put it, *mei ganshide ren cai xin*, 'only those with nothing to do, believe in religion' (interview, November 1995, Zhengzhou).

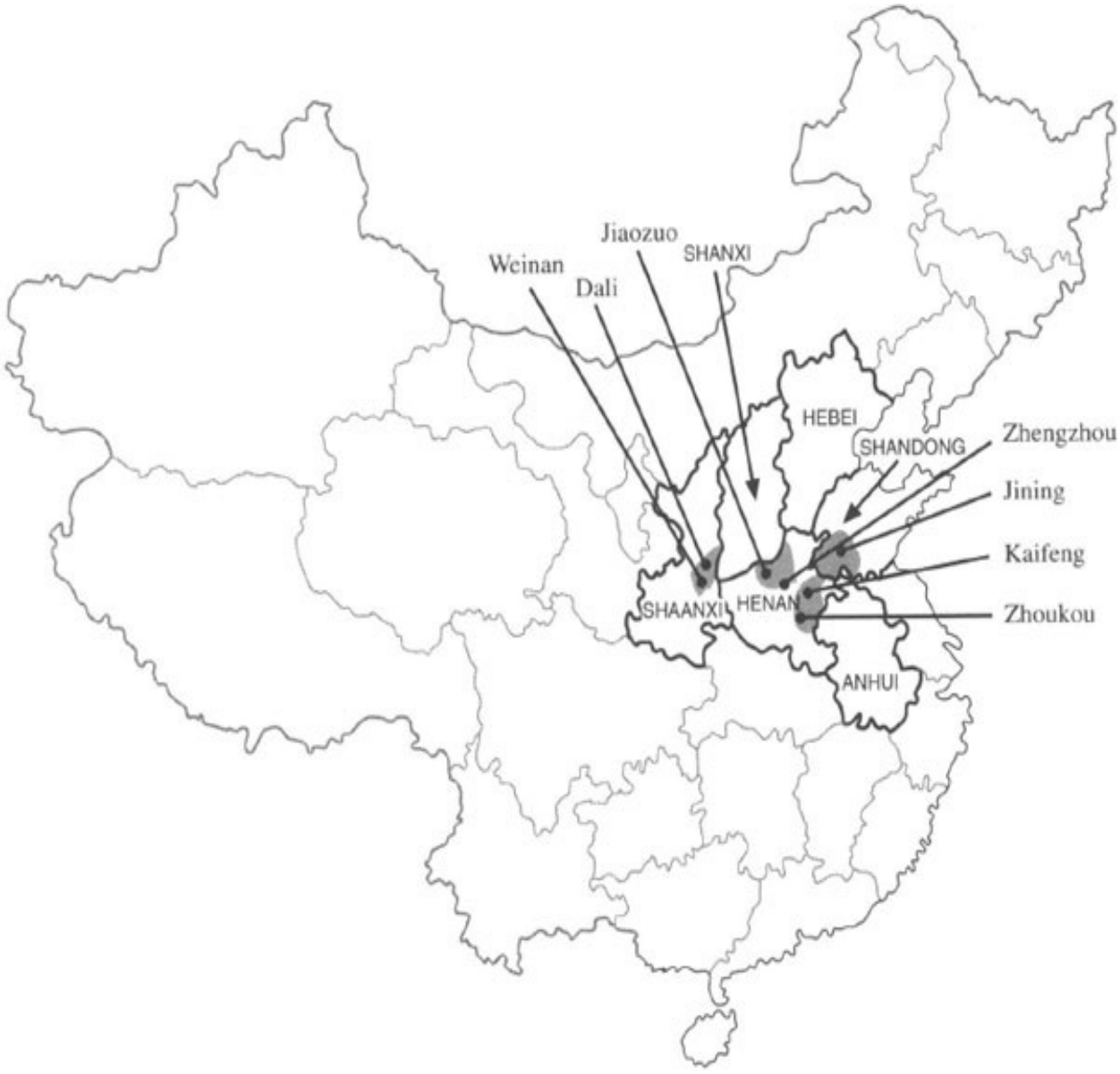
In documentation of local histories and the women's movements it is the secular voice of mainstream activism which has received documentation, rather than those speaking from within more marginal movements. In publications documenting Henan's local history (*difangzhi*), it is women like Yan Bin who come to voice as an early ancestress of Communist women reformers, suggesting a seemingly unbroken chain of a history of progressive secularism. As early as 1907, the young Henan-born intellectual, political reformer and editor of a short-lived feminist magazine *Zhongguo Xin Nujie Zazhi* (Magazine for China's New Women), Yan Bin, called for women to attack religion as a root of their ignorance, declaring that women should recognise there were no 'buddhas' and no 'ghosts' in China. Religion as an anathema to progress was the axiomatic conclusion of reformers to whom social justice could only be realised in democratic societies based on the pillars of science and technology (Yu Ren, 1984).

Against this intellectual and ideological heritage, dispassionate consideration of the place of religion in society has little chance. Both scholarly writing and All-China Women's Federation publications reflect a conceptual paradigm which

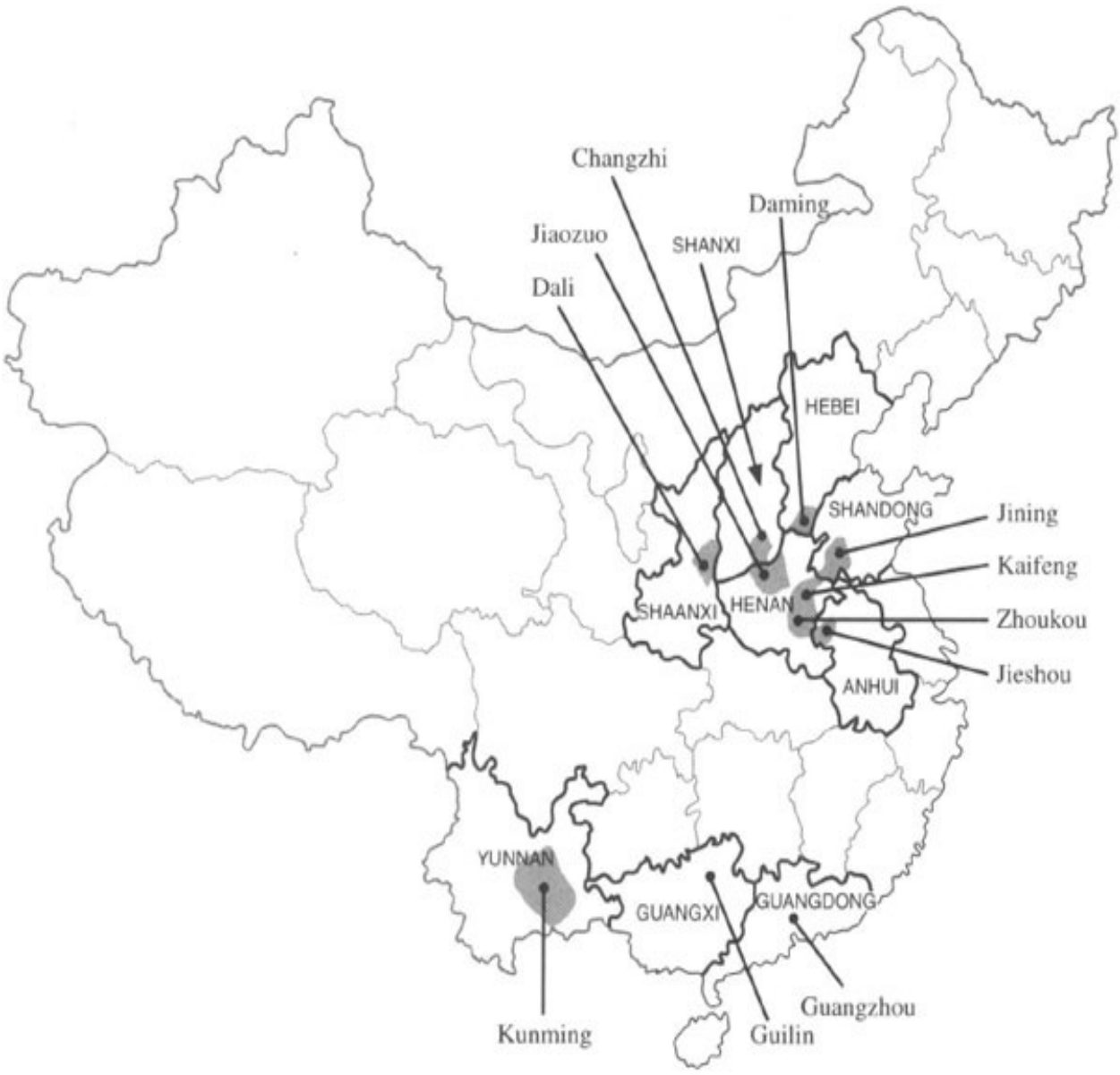
links religious belief and women's status in a tight equation that by definition signifies victim status. As the scholar Du Fangqin explains, representative of thinking to be found among orthodox historians and New Era gender scholars (united in the face of *a priori* assumptions about religion), in primitive religion such systems of belief fulfilled a function of explanation of natural and social phenomena not otherwise explicable. As the level of production advanced, and with it technological and scientific sophistication, this early function came to be replaced by a function firmly embedded in the sufferings of women's history: the function of consolation, now still needed for the disempowered and helpless facing overwhelming contemporary forces of industrialisation and modernisation (Du, 1988:304). Although Du focuses on the impact of Daoism and Buddhism (for a Han scholar, the neglect of Islam as a major indigenous religious tradition is common), she speaks of religion in all its diverse manifestations.

In 1989, the Henan Branch of the All-China Women's Federation published a history of local women (Li Chunyan, 1989), representative of official publications of this kind, which not only focuses entirely on the lives and activities of Han women but applies criteria of liberation and emancipation which press all women into one uniform mould of materialist progress, or into invisibility. As a consequence, an unchanged framework of analysis presents the four fetters of political, religious, clan and patriarchal authority as constituents of the 'old society' (*jiu shehui*) which structure the existential and political subjugation of women. In this invariable and still dominant definition of women's oppression, the act of liberation by the Communist Party (as a cornerstone of socialist progress) is linked to the question of the liberators' lasting legitimacy to such claims; thus, the historical act of women's liberation and the nature of this liberation are entwined into a symbiotic relationship of power.

Where historians continue to interpret women's aspirations and commitments firmly within the official periodisation of political change, neither in historical nor in contemporary terms can allowance be made for the presence of contrasting lifestyles and criteria of emancipation such as constitute the turning points in the lives of Chinese Muslim women in *zhongyuan diqu* (Central China).



MAP 2: Distribution of Women's Islamic Schools, Early-Qing



MAP 3: Establishment of Islamic Schools for Women during Qing

MAP 4: Distribution of Women's Mosques, Late-Qing to Republican Era

Chapter III

The Beginnings and History of a Female Religious Culture

The female religious culture of Central China centres on mosques specifically built for Muslim women to perform religious ablutions, participate in worship, acquire some basic knowledge concerning precepts and rites, and to learn about female physiology (concerning menstruation, pregnancy, and lying-in) under the guidance of a *nu ahong*. Often, after their religious concerns have been addressed, women will gather and talk about any event or issue of interest. Muslims in *zhongyuan* (Central China) take it for granted that *nusi* exist because the needs of women must be met. Why did such a unique culture appear in *zhongyuan*? How did it originate and develop? What effects does it have on Muslim women and on Muslim society? How do Muslims living in this region explain this phenomenon? An examination of the origin and history of *nusi* provides answers to these questions.

Zhongyuan as a geographic and cultural term was set in a dynamic context by the scholars Yang Tingshuo and Luo Kanglong: 'Before the Qin Dynasty [221–207 BCJ, *[zhongyuan]* mainly referred to the middle reaches of the Yellow River, then, gradually, it was extended to the lower reaches of the Yellow River, and even the upper and middle reaches of the Huai River – the regions of Huaxia culture concentration and expansion. From the Qin Dynasty onwards, the term '*zhongyuan*' referred to the regions of concentration and distribution of the ancient Han Culture, which first clustered around the Yellow River Reaches and then spread to the lower middle reaches of the Yangtze River, and to parts of Lingnan. When modern Han culture matured after the tenth century, the centre of Han culture moved to the lower middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Now, *zhongyuan* refers to all the regions of the Yellow River Reaches, the Huai River reaches, the lower middle reaches of the Yangtze River and parts of Lingnan which are part of the region where modern Han culture was located and expanded' (1992:4).

Thus, *zhongyuan* in the process of time has undergone various changes. In a narrow sense, it refers to present-day Henan Province; whereas, in a wider sense it covers the middle and lower reaches, (including most of Henan, Northwestern Shandong, and Southern Hebei and Shanxi), or the entire reaches of the Yellow River. Sometimes, however, the term is also used to mark the frontiers of the inner landmass of China, where the Han nationality (or the former Huaxia nationality) was originally distributed. In the wider sense, *zhongyuan* actually refers to this area where the Han culture originates. Considering the historical settings in which the *nusi* emerged, we use *zhongyuan* in its wider context, mainly covering the entire Henan province, parts of Hebei, Shandong, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Hubei.

Since the seventh century, when Muslims first arrived in China, they chose mainly to reside in cities and ports where Han culture was well developed. After the thirteenth century, they spread throughout the country. A relatively large Muslim population settled in *zhongyuan*. During the high tide of Islamic spiritual renaissance which swept the Muslim communities in late Ming and early Qing (during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), formal Islamic religious education was first established and developed in *zhongyuan*, and resulted in two major traditions – referred to as the Shaanxi and Shandong Schools, whose influence was felt throughout the Muslim communities. The earliest *qingzhen nuxue* (also called *nuzi jingxue* locally, meaning an Islamic School for Women) was also founded. The development of religious education in *zhongyuan* turned the region into both the cultural centre of Islam in China and the place of origin for *nuzi jingxue jiaoyu* (women's religious education). Later on, although the cultural centre of China's Islamic religion moved westward, the *nuxue* system continued its development in *zhongyuan* (mainly in Henan, Hebei, Shandong and Anhui) and evolved into *nusi* (women's mosques) run by *nu ahong* (female *ahong*) in the reign of Jiaqing (1796–1820).

Quite a number of women's mosques were built in the North, Northwest, Northeast of China, and in areas south of the Yangtze River during the short decades between the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republican days (turn of twentieth century). Frequent wars and radical social changes in more recent times have had great impact on China's religious cultures. Nevertheless, the *nusi* system, so deeply rooted in *zhongyuan* continues to exist and develop. And this region still has the greatest number of *nusi* and exercises remarkable influence in China. Studying issues concerning Muslim women in China therefore requires a focus on the *zhongyuan* region.

Pressures of Existence – From Favourite Guests to Marginal Group

After Muslims entered China during the Tang Dynasty, they and their descendants were confronted with the problem of survival – the survival of Islamic religion and of their Muslim identity. As carrier and inheritor of a foreign culture, and as a marginal social group as well, Muslims living within the orbit of Han culture always feel the differences of the two cultures, and experience the pressure arising from these differences. The major factors which influenced their living conditions included the ethnic and religious policies of the ruling social class, official decrees which decided the position Muslims and their offspring would occupy in Chinese society, and the influence of Confucius culture as they sought to accommodate themselves to a social environment not their own. From the Tang Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, the attitudes and policies of the Chinese ruling classes towards the Islamic religion and Muslims changed from openness and tolerance to coerced integration and discriminatory treatment. The status of Muslims in Chinese society declined sharply. With these increased tensions the pressure of existence for Muslims intensified accordingly.

In his work *On the Islamic Growth in China*, Bai Shouyi introduced the following periodisation of Chinese Islamic religion. According to him, the first period, from the Tang Dynasty through to Yuan Dynasty (seventh to fourteenth century), is 'the period of consolidation of Islam (*yizhi shidai*)'; while the second period, from Ming Dynasty to end of Qing Dynasty (fourteenth century to 1911) is 'the age of adversity (*enan shidai*)' (in Li Xinghua & Feng, 1985:53–58). The social status and material circumstances of Muslims varied greatly in these two periods. In the first period, Muslims lived in a more tolerant and relatively open cultural environment and Islam was transmitted from generation to generation preserving its faith in self-contained religious communities. In the second period, however, the discriminatory ethnic and religious policies pursued seriously threatened the survival of Muslims and their Islamic religion.

Muslims' Social Status in Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties

The existence of historical records is often testimony to the social position held by an individual, a class, or a given group of people. Generally, only elites leave documented traces. In a male-centred society, however, upper-class women also were rarely participants of public life. Scarcity of documentation on lower-class women is therefore unsurprising. From the Tang Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty, certain historical records about Muslims provide a perspective (even though it is

a male-centred perspective) enabling us to some extent to understand the change of Muslim status in Chinese society and the influence certain individual Muslims have exercised on Chinese history.

Male Muslims Occupying a Superior Position Economically and Politically

The Tang and Song Dynasty administrations favoured open-door policies and encouraged international trade. Active political, economic and cultural exchanges continued between China and the Arab Empire, and their envoys and merchants came and went frequently. Most of the Muslim merchants would choose to stay close to the ports or big cities where transportation was convenient and the economy prosperous. The Chinese government treated the envoys and merchants who arrived in China with great respect and politeness, calling them *fanke* (foreign guest, *fan* means foreign, *ke* means guest). Those considering staying on were encouraged by favourable government policies. Some Muslims chose to stay for a number of years, whereas others never returned to their native places. Muslim settlements were called *fanfang* (foreign community). The government would appoint a *fanzhang* (head of the community but also a *fan*) to manage the affairs in the community. In the *fanfang*, Muslims were allowed to live in their own ways. They could build mosques or start schools for their children. In the case of matters arising which were not the concern of Chinese courts, traditional Muslim laws would be used to settle a dispute.

In the social hierarchy of that time, members of the Han nationality, the emperor and officials at different levels, were classified as belonging to the upper class, and they symbolised power and wealth. As welcome guests of the upper class, Muslims in China enjoyed high positions and exercised great influence. Quite a few Muslim names were recorded in the annals of the Tang and Song Dynasties, including their achievements and the privileges accorded them by the government. These Muslims were generally merchants who had stayed in China for many years and became so powerful and wealthy locally that they surrounded themselves by luxury. We can learn from the writings of Bai Shouyi (1983), Yang Huaizhong (1991) and Yang and Yu Zhengui (1995), among others, that Muslim envoys and merchants were exclusively male; they were regarded as the most honoured guests in China; they were accorded solicitous hospitality by government officials wherever they went; and they were showered with precious gifts when they were called to an interview with the emperor. Those Muslim merchants who chose to live in China would generally make friends with, or even marry into, the local governing class, thus making

themselves influential members of the elite with superior position in politics and economy. Children born into mixed marriages were called *tusheng fanke* (meaning a native-born foreigner), admitted to the imperial examinations and thus to holding of official government positions.

Yang Huaizhong summarised Muslim economic and religious activities in Tang and Song China as follows: ‘As for the Muslims coming to the East, the Chinese government issued a series of special policies in favour of international trade, therefore, they were able to maintain their religious belief, their ways of life, their traditions and culture. These Muslims came to do business, not to preach the religion, so Islam was passed on from one generation to another among the Muslim merchants coming from the Arab world or Persia’. Yang continues: ‘With the Koran in one hand and merchandise in another, the Arab merchants have built up a bridge for intercultural exchange while trying to keep up a two-way flow of commodities’ (Yang Huaizhong & Yu Zhengui; 1995:83–84). The tolerant policies which characterised the Tang and Song Dynasties, and China’s developed economy and rich culture, all became attractions to these Muslim settlers. Under the protection of the Chinese government, they lived in their own ways while freely enjoying the riches of Chinese civilisation. The Islamic religion was an important part in Muslim life, but its influence was limited within the *fanfang*, to be shared by their wives and children only.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the powerful Mongolians, though a minority in terms of numbers, constituted the governing class in China, thus changing the previous social stratification. Ethnic minorities, formerly referred to as *yidi* (a contemptuous address), now occupied the top social ladders, while the members of the Han majority were re-classified downwards and joined the lower social classes. In the new social echelon, Mongolians were at the top, while Muslim artisans, civilians, officials, scholars, soldiers and merchants who came with the Mongolian Army from Central and West Asia, or from Persia (and called *Huihui* in all the Yuan Dynasty historical records) were ranked only second to the Mongolians. Many of the upper-class *Huihui* became high-grade officials who accumulated great political and economical power in their hands, and thus became part of the ruling class. Records note Muslim intellectuals who stood out for their great achievements. In his article *Hui People and Huijiao in the Yuan Dynasty*, written in the 1930s, Bai Shouyi listed sixteen (Yang Huaizhong listed seventeen) Muslims who were appointed high ranking officials in the central government, thirty-two Muslims took up important positions in the local government (Li & Feng, 1985:168–206). Considering that there were also many Muslims who became officials but whose careers did not enter the historical records, we can conclude that Muslims had indeed played a significant part in

the political life in Yuan Dynasty. With their traditional business acumen, Muslims also maintained a superior economic position. Documents from the Yuan Dynasty recorded many stories of rich Hui merchants. In addition, Muslims also contributed significantly to culture, science and technology. Such fruits of Islamic culture as the astronomical calendar, medicine, architecture, boxing, and more, were introduced into Chinese society by Muslim intellectuals.

Though Muslims forced to come to the east had left their native places, they found a peaceful settlement in China under the policy of 'rule according to the diverse traditions of the ruled'. Islamic culture spread more extensively in this time than in Tang and Song Dynasties, with mosques built everywhere in the country. The *Memorial on the Reconstruction of Mosques in Dingzhou* stated that: 'There are about 10,000 mosques now, whether it is near the capital city or in the remote areas, all their gates are facing the west so as to show respect to the Heaven' (*Encyclopaedia of Islam in China*, 1994:133). This provides some ideas about the great number of Muslims and the flourishing of Islamic religion in that period.

The great majority of Muslims who came to the East during the Yuan Dynasty were male, only a few from the upper-class stratum brought their family members with them. So it was quite common for a Muslim to marry a Chinese wife. These women became Muslims themselves, and so did their children. Though common Muslims left no written accounts, a rich oral tradition relates how Han women married Muslim men in the early times of settlement However, as Muslims grew steadily in numbers and the initial period of a general policy of exogamous marriage only lasted a short time, Muslims still maintained their unique physical characteristics in that period. Volume Six of *Explanations to Laws Enforced in the Ming Dynasty* relates that *'Semu* signifies *Huihui. Qincha* is a sub-group of *Huihni. Huihui* have wavy hair and a big nose, while *Qincha* have yellow hair and blue eyes' (*Ming Lu Ji Jue Fu Li*, Vol. 6, 1969 copy).

Bai Shouyi writes about the position of Muslims and their demographic characteristics in the Yuan Dynasty: '(1) Ethnically, they were mostly Muslims from foreign lands. Though joined by some Mongolians and Han people in the Yuan Dynasty, its basic composition did not change. (2) The believers of Islam enjoyed an active and free position in the economy, in politics and in cultural life, at least, they were not put in a passive or oppressed position. The situation did not change when Mongolians occupied the elite positions during the Yuan Dynasty' (Li & Feng, 1985:55). Though Islamic culture and Chinese culture began to influence each other, Islam continued to exercise a dominant influence on Muslims.

Female Muslims in the Tang and Song Dynasties

Women had no position in the traditional patriarchal society and were rarely mentioned in historical records, Muslim women were even less visible. An impressionistic description of Muslim women in this period however can be given on the basis of scattered historical references and popular oral transmissions.

Muslim arrivals in China during the Tang and Song Dynasties were from all accounts male. It is hard to find evidence of females coming with them. Zhu Yu (Song Dynasty) wrote in Volume 2 of *Pingzhou Ketan* (A Few Words about Pingzhou) that: 'When I first came across the melody *Pusaman* in *Yuefu* (A Collection of Songs), I did not know its meaning. However, I became aware of its meanings when I heard people in Guangzhou call the foreign women *Pusaman*' (*Congshu Jicheng Chubian, 1935–1937*:20). Some foreign merchants had already settled in Guangzhou during the Tang Dynasty; and many of them had married Chinese women. Whether or not Zhu Yu saw foreign Muslim women or female descendants of the foreign merchants and their Chinese wives, set apart by their distinguished physical characteristics, is hard to tell. During the Tang Dynasty, quite a few *fanke* in other important cities also married Chinese women. In order to protect these women, the government once gave out a notice, forbidding foreigners to take their Chinese wives to their native lands. It is recorded in Volume 100 of the *Tang Hui Yao* (Important Events Of The Tang Dynasty): 'On 16 June of the 2nd year of Zhenguan's reign [628], His Majesty announced that no foreigner is allowed to take his Chinese wife back to his home country' (1955 reprint: 1796). The foreigners referred to here, of course, include Muslims. During the Song Dynasty, even more Chinese women (some of noble origin) married foreign merchants.

According to *Song Huiyao Jigao* (Of Important Events in the Song Dynasty), during the reign of Emperor Gaozong (1137), 'a big ([Muslim] merchant named Pu Yali arrived in Guangzhou. Admiring his wealth, a *Youwudaifu* [high-ranking military officer] let him marry his sister. As a result, Pu Yali never returned to his home country'. The sister of a *Youwudaifu* certainly enjoyed a high social position those days. *Pingzhou Ketan* also recorded the story of a woman from the royal family marrying a Muslim in Guangzhou. During the North Song Dynasty, a man named Liu from the *fanfang* in Guangzhou married a woman born of royal family. He was promoted to the rank of the *zuohandianzhi* (a low-ranking officer). Liu died and left no male heir. Seeing that everyone from her husband's family wanted a share of his property, the widow asked someone to strike the drum for a court trial. It was then realised that a woman of royal origin

had married a foreigner. The Court announced a law that only *fanke* who had lived in China for more than three generations, with at least one of the family members in the three generations an office-holder in China, were allowed to marry a woman of royal origin' (*Congshu Jicheng Chubian, 1935–1937*:22). Chen Yuan wrote about the intermarriage of Muslims and Han people in Tang and Song times: in the times of *Wudai* (907–960) the emperors preferred to marry Persian women, and the Song Dynasty official families liked to marry women from *Dashi* [Arabia]' (Li & Feng, 1985:9). Based on this information, we may conclude that at least certain Muslim merchants in the larger urban settlements had become an attraction to the elite society because of their superior social and economic position.

Islam requires a Muslim to marry someone of the faith, and Confucianism demands a woman to obey her husband. Under this dual influence, a Chinese woman who married a Muslim was bound to accept her husband's religion and live his way of life. Records of life in *fanfang* in the Tang and Song periods have proved this to be so. Muslims started their own schools, set up mosques in *fanfang*, and built graveyards. Muslims were required to be buried 'with their head to the south but the face turned to the west'. These foreigners and their descendants lived in the Muslim way. Though 'dressed differently, they take the same food as the Chinese' with the only exception that they 'won't eat pork' or 'any animals not killed with a knife' (*Congshu Jicheng Chubian, 1935–1937*). Nothing in the records indicates that Chinese wives had influence over their Muslim husbands. As a matter of fact, these women and children were totally Islamized. Their husbands were foreigners living in China, the children were native *fanke*, and the wives and mothers were the only Chinese citizens in the family. Whether or not they were married with their own consent, these women became the first Muslim Chinese.

In his article *The Period When Huijiao Was Introduced to China*, Liu Fengwu analysed what had caused Chinese women who married foreigners during the Tang Dynasty to become Islamized. In his opinion, 'the Chinese did not take a deep belief in any religion at the time. What is more, the government took a *laissez-faire* attitude to all the religions and did not interfere in people's religious beliefs during the early Tang Dynasty. Therefore, the Chinese women who married foreigners would, of course, be assimilated by their husbands and turned to Islam themselves. The Islamization of Chinese began with such a relationship' (Li & Feng, 1985:106).

Few records describe the lives of Muslim women in the Yuan Dynasty. As so many Muslims married Chinese women it was not considered worth recording unless a Muslim's mother or wife was a *Huihui* herself. This happened in the

case of a Muslim named Bie Luosha whose place of origin, names of his great grandfather, grandfather, and father are included in the record, which also told that his mother Hui Huishi is a *Huihui*, and so is his wife, Da Shimanshi' (Li & Feng, 1985:138). In view of the sex (mostly male) and distribution (mainly in Han settlement areas) of Muslims coming into China in the Yuan Dynasty, we can deduce the number of Chinese women who married Muslims, and became Muslims through intermarriage just like women in Tang and Song times.

Tales from Hui oral tradition depict times when wives could neither speak the language of their husbands nor grasp the faith (Li & Luckert, 1994; also see Chapter X). But it was the contribution of these women to Muslim culture to familiarise themselves with their husbands' ways of living and become Muslims themselves. Many stories are recorded about Hui and Han intermarriage in *zhongyuan*; one tells about an ancestor of a Muslim family who married a Han woman in a Hui village in Yanshi County, Henan Province. He had killed a Mongolian in Luoyang city when trying to defend someone against injustice. When he escaped to Yanshi, he saw a Han girl in danger and immediately came to her rescue. To show their gratitude, the girl's parents let him marry their daughter, provided that their first-born boy would inherit his mother's family name, and the second that of his father's. Though some of their descendants in the village now still bear the Han family name, they have all been classified as Huizu.

Both the Islamic and the Confucian patriarchal doctrines required women to identify themselves with their spouses' culture. Together with their husbands and children, they formed a unique group under the protection of the Chinese government. Though small in number, they enjoyed a superior position in society. In the Yuan Dynasty, a great number of Muslims were forced to move to the east. As their native lands were taken over by invaders, they had to regard their new host society as home. Intermarriage greatly increased their number. In about one-hundred years, these Muslims from Central and West Asia or Persia, together with their Chinese wives and children, had grown into a unique and distinct group. In the whole process of Islamization, women played a passive role: they were made to marry a foreigner, an outsider, to serve their father's or brother's economic or political interests, and to be treated as reproductive tool by their husbands. The comparatively high social position Muslims enjoyed and the ruling class' tolerant attitudes during the Tang and Song Periods made the maintenance of religious belief and cultural traditions a less pressing concern. Belief and cultural traditions were not the domain of women; their responsibility lay in ensuring the continuity of the ethnic group.

Discrimination during Ming and Qing Dynasties

The Ming Dynasty brought calamity. In the name of Han civilisation, and to redress the wrongs suffered during the Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty, rulers of the Ming Dynasty carried out a policy of undisguised Han chauvinism. Minorities sank back into the social margin where they were viewed with hostility and suspicion. A forced assimilation policy was carried out and the Muslim groups were not allowed to marry among themselves. The laws of the Ming Dynasty stipulated that: 'All Mongolians and *Semu* people are forbidden to marry in their own ethnic groups. They must marry a Chinese (Han). Those who violate the law will be flogged 80 times and turned into slaves' (*Da Ming Hui Dian*, Vol.4, 1976 reprint: 2287). An attached note says: '… for fear that the ethnic group may grow too large, we forbid these people to marry among themselves' (Ibid.). Obviously, rulers in Ming Dynasty did not like to see different nationalities appear in the most important regions in China. They meant to sinicise by law all the minorities that had moved to Central China. Hui residents with different cultural traditions and physical characteristics began to be oppressed both politically and culturally. They could no longer enjoy equal legislative rights. The forced assimilation policy threatened the very existence of Muslims causing the survival of their own cultural identity and of the Islamic religion to be at stake.

How could a harmonious relationship with mainstream culture be evolved? Ming society allowed only for one cultural model, based on the doctrines of Confucianism. Hence Muslims taking high offices were trapped in a dilemma. Many of them chose to either conceal their Muslim identity or to renounce their religion altogether. There was a saying that 'A promotion to *erpin* [the second highest official rank] will produce a traitor [to Islamic faith]'. Life was also getting harder and harder for common Muslims. Judging by the above-mentioned decree prohibiting endogamy, it must have been common for Han people to refuse to marry a lower-positioned Muslim as rulers during the Ming Dynasty allowed for an escape clause: 'If a Chinese is unwilling to marry a *Huihui* or *Qincha*, he or she is allowed to choose a spouse among his or her own ethnic group without being punished' (*Da Ming Hui Dian*, vol.4, 1976 reprint: 2287). We have no knowledge of how the law was implemented, but judging by the change in Chinese Muslims' appearance over time, we must conclude that many of them did choose spouses of Han origin.

However, in order to preserve their own cultural traditions and beliefs without violating the law, Muslims had to find their own solutions. During the Ming Dynasty, Muslims evolved patterns of endogamous marriage. If a non-Muslim

married a Muslim, he or she was under pressure to convert to Islam. As it was an accepted patriarchal norm that a woman must obey her husband, Muslims raised fewer objections to men marrying Han women than their own daughters marrying non-Muslims. If a female Muslim did marry a Han, her husband was obliged to convert to Islam. In the Ming Dynasty, a Han with high social status would not allow his daughter to marry a Hui since this entailed a collective diminishing of status. Also, only the poor and low-class Han males would countenance such a marriage which was the majority of cases where Han males had, since the Ming Dynasty decrees were issued, converted to Islam. Gradually, Islam, originally a religion prevalent among members of the upper class, was turned into the religion of the poor and dispossessed.

While Islam was not totally forbidden in the Ming Dynasty, Muslims who occupied higher offices might conceal their identity. Many of them, however, contributed to the construction of mosques whenever they got a chance, and some even persuaded the emperor to issue an order for the building of mosques. For instance, in the early years of Emperor Hongwu's reign in the Ming Dynasty 'His Majesty ordered to have mosques built in Xijing and Nanjing [the capital cities], and in southern Yunnan, Fujian and Guangdong. His Majesty also personally wrote *baizizan* [a eulogy] in praise of the Prophet's virtues'. The Ming Emperor Xuanzong once issued imperial orders to build a mosque in Nanjing in response to Zheng He's request (Liu Zhi, 1984 reprint: 358–374). Mosques built by imperial decree raised the social position of Islam, and assistance from upper-class Muslims helped to sustain religious sites in certain areas.

However, only a small number of Muslims were to be counted among the elite. The great majority were part of a discriminated marginal group which suffered oppression, and never wavered in their religious belief. Fervent believers of Islam, particularly those who had taken up religious offices, distanced themselves from (non-Muslim) upper-class society and gradually grew more isolationist in position and viewpoint. Islam was beginning to stagnate.

The conservatism of Islam stood in sharp contrast to an increase in its number of adherents among the lower classes, which produced tensions as demands for religious and cultural knowledge were left unattended. In mid- and late Ming Dynasty, the very survival of the religion was at stake as 'there is a shortage of Islamic scriptures and scholars, therefore it is hard to clearly understand the translation [of the scriptures] and to preach it' (*Encyclopaedia of Islam in China*, 1994:223). The discrimination suffered under the Qing Dynasty rulers compounded the problems for Islamic religion and for Muslims.

How to retain their own cultural traditions and Muslim identity, and how to

adjust to the all-pervasive Confucian culture? Should the decline of Islam be allowed to continue, should Muslims assimilate and drown in a sea of Han culture; or should they start reforms to develop a Muslim culture and find ways to adjust to an environment without compromising its core beliefs? Beginning from late Ming Dynasty, these questions were posed by concerned scholars and Muslim commoners alike. Around the sixteenth century, the *jingtang* educational model was set up for the purpose of teaching Islamic scriptures and promoting Islamic religion.

The First Popular Mass Cultural Movement in Chinese Muslim History

The movement of spiritual and cultural construction sought to establish the *jingtang* (religious) educational model and to translate Islamic scriptures into Chinese. This popular cultural movement initiated by Muslims in Central China gradually spread to all Muslim communities throughout the country. Though propelled forth by Islamic scholars (*jingshi*), the movement was joined by all Muslims. In addition to the teaching of the Islamic scriptures and canons, *yixue* (charitable schools) were set up everywhere and reforms carried out to enable the teaching of Islam in Chinese, an approach more suitable both to Muslim's conditions and to the social conditions at the time, *jingshi* formulated important commentaries on Islamic doctrines and made these accessible to the masses of Muslims. In Central China, the education of males and females became the focus of intellectual attention. Neither dynastic changes nor the ever stricter ethnic repression suffered under the Qing rulers could interrupt the movement which swept its Muslim communities.

Materials concerning this unprecedented cultural movement can be found in the *Jingxuexi Zhuanpu* (shortened to *Zhuanpu*), 'the only book which has recorded the names of the well-known Islamic *jingshi*, of Hui and Sala nationalities, their genealogies and their societal activities', Zhao Can, *Zhuanpu*, 1989 print: 1). *Zhuanpu* was completed in the 36th year of the Emperor Kangxi's reign (1697). Signed by Zhenhuiponachi (or She Qiling, a famous *jingshi*), this book is, in fact, the product of collective work. Zhao Can, one of She Qiling's students, did the actual writing. He was praised as having a 'marvellous talent for doing great things'. For over 40 years, he delivered lectures in curtained rooms, and was invited to teach in more than twenty locations. His students, over 100 in number, could be found everywhere, from Guangdong in the South to Liaoning in the North. He set up strict criteria for *jingshi* who would be included in the book. Everyone accepted must be a religious scholar popularly

acknowledged for his academic qualifications and personal virtues. Zhao Can took a serious approach to writing; he obviously took great care over the description of such eminent Islamic scholars. Thus the work provides very valuable and reliable data for the study of Muslim society during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Based on the information provided by *Zhuanpu*, the characteristics of this grassroots mass cultural movement can be summarised as follows:

Jingshi were the initiators of the movement. They started schools and gave patient advice. As enlightenment spread, a cultural mass movement was gradually formed with the participation of all Muslims. Hu Dengzhou (1522–1597) was the founder of the *jingtang* educational model. Worried about the decline of Islam, Hu promoted religion by setting up schools. He 'sets up school in his own house', and 'never gets tired of learning or teaching'. His education seemed to 'have awakened Muslims from dreams,' and more came to learn from him. *Zhuanpu* described that 'carrying scripture books, people from the ancient lands of Wu, Chu, Yan and Qi, came to learn from him, one after another' (Zhao Can, 1989:2). All the *jingshi* after Hu Dengzhou carried on their teacher's vision and established schools to teach scriptures. Hence *jingtang* education soon spread throughout Muslim communities.

Muslims in Central China, under the more direct influence of Han Confucian culture, took quickly to the new education, and in time, the centre of Islamic activism moved from Hu Dengzhou's hometown in Shaanxi to the east. More well-known *jingshi* in Ming and Qing times gathered in Shandong, Henan, Hebei, Anhui, and along the Yangtze River, covering a region that extended from Wuchang to Nanjing, Zhenjiang, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. Through the efforts made by Hu Dengzhou's first generation of students, *jingtang* education began to extend its influence far beyond Shaanxi. His second generation of students delivered lectures in curtained school-rooms across several provinces. They taught in Kaifeng and Zhengzhou, Henan Province, in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, in Weishan, Yunnan Province, and in Tongxin, Ningxia Province. Their students included in *Zhuanpu* were generally from the different provinces in *zhongyuan* (Central China). From the time Flu's third generation of students began to teach until *Zhuanpu* was completed, *zhongyuan* covered the lower and middle reaches of both the Yellow and the Yangtze Rivers and became the centre of the Islamic culture in China.

Most of the famous *jingshi* were either born in that region or set up curtained school-rooms to deliver lectures there. The most outstanding of the third generation students was Zhang Shaoshan, a great scholar of the Islamic scriptures. Born in Lintong, Shaanxi, Zhang followed his teacher to Diaogou and

Zhengzhou, Flenan, in order to study; he married and settled down. After finishing his studies, he was invited to be *jingshi* in Nanjing, Xian, and other localities. However, his activities were mainly limited to *zhongyuan*. The four eminent *jingshi* after Zhang Shaoshan were honoured as 'the four top scholars' in the eastern land: Li Dinghuan from Xining, Qinghai; Chang Zhimei from Jining, Shandong; Ma Junshi from Nanjing; Ma Minglong from Wuchang. Three scholars were from the central region, and Chang Zhimei was the most celebrated among them. 'The number of talented persons cultivated in schools which criss-cross the lands of the ancient states of Wu, Chu, Yan, and Qin does not come up to half of all those raised in Jishui. Over 100 outstanding scholars were brought up there. That is how the saying came about that Ji is a place full of talent,' records the *Zhuanpu* (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 58). She Yunshan, advisor to the *Zhuanpu*, was another prestigious *jingshi* who succeeded Chang Zhimei. He married and settled down in Xiangxian County, Henan. His work was widely respected, and he was invited to be *jingshi* in Shaanxi, Henan, Anhui, Beijing, Hebei and Liaoning. His influence was felt throughout the country.

Zhuanpu impresses with its clear understanding of Islam, a strong sense of urgency but also buoyant enthusiasm, sentiments shared by *jingshi* and common Muslims in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. Based on his clear understanding of Islam's true position, Hu Dengzhou, founder of *jingtang* education, promoted education for the cultivation of people. One generation after another, celebrated *jingshi* continued the tradition of teaching and education. The scholar She Yunshan was known for his relentless work in pursuit of self-improvement. Though living and teaching in the Islamic scripture school, he never stopped his in-depth study of the Islamic doctrines. When teaching in Kaocheng, Henan, he recalled the history of *jingtang* education, also remembering how his teacher Chang Zhimei 'remained restless night after night, thinking about how to promote the Islamic schools. Fearing that the learning might be lost, he and his students kept working hard from morning till night' (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 89). This apprehension of imminent collapse of faith urged She Yunshan to dedicate himself whole-heartedly to the promotion of Islamic scripture studies and to the training of qualified teachers. She Yunshan often went to the students' dormitory to check their studies at midnight. These students devoted all their time to study, many of them would not take the trouble to undress when going to bed so as to save every valuable minute for study. Their diligence was not in vain as many of them became celebrated Muslim scholars later.

But common Muslims also became conscious of intellectuals' efforts to resolve the crisis, by showing great respect for *jingshi* and assisting in efforts to

run schools for the promotion of Islam. A good example is recorded in *Zhuanpu* from Kaocheng, Henan (in present day Lankao County), where rules were formulated to keep the school in the village running smoothly. In the opening passage of the 'agreement', the reasons for starting the school are given: firstly, 'Islamic doctrines have been buried for a long time', and many Muslims appeared to have little knowledge of them. Thus scholars and teachers were badly needed to 'pass on the scriptures and promote the doctrines, to enlighten the young and introduce something new,' therefore enabling Islam to 'go on for ever', to 'flourish and shine brilliantly'. Secondly, because Muslims 'have been busy making a living all the time, they become muddleheaded after being out of school for so many years'. 'They need a teacher to give them instruction and advice,' to 'awaken them from dreams [of false worldly rewards] and intoxicated drunkenness'. Only then could people 'learn about the doctrine' and 'live it as an example for both young and old'. Thirdly, the school children in the community 'are too young to travel far, so they need teachers to teach them the scriptural canons, to tell them what is right and what is wrong', thus increasing their knowledge and aspiration'. The promising pupils would be chosen for further careful instruction to make sure of their future contribution.

The purpose of creating such a code of conduct was to prevent villagers from turning the school into a market place. Anyone who violated the rules would be scolded and 'fined with money or rice' (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 14–15). The case indicates Muslims in *zhongyuan* were aware of the crisis and attached much importance to the revitalising of their faith, motivating them to work in solidarity. *Jingshi* studied scriptures and taught students; students were learning diligently; common Muslims offered assistance in running scripture schools; women urged their husbands to become good Muslims. With joint efforts from *jingshi* and common Muslims, a fine tradition of learning had been developed in Muslim communities. Visiting prestigious scholars in order to study with them was the commonly accepted mode of learning and is the case even in present times. The great majority of Muslims then believed that it was better to study the scriptures and become a teacher than to turn to Confucianism and to an official career.

All Muslims faced two serious questions: How should Muslims react to Han culture? How could they fit in harmoniously with the surrounding culture and yet retain a cultural tradition of their own? After ail, they wore Han Chinese dress, spoke the Chinese language, had extensive social connections with their Han neighbours and found it easier to study Confucian canons than to study Islamic scriptures. Muslim scholars in late Ming and early Qing Dynasties started the reform by accepting this reality; searching for similarities between the

host and home cultures, they explained Islamic doctrine couched in Confucian terminology, and translated the scriptures into Chinese. In the period beginning with Hu Dengzhou and ending with the year when *Zhuanpu* was finished, about ten prominent *jingshi* came from a Confucian education, and several of them had begun the great task of translation from Arabic and Persian into Chinese. This bold step enabled those Muslims ignorant of the Koranic language, some Han officials, and Confucianist scholars to gain access to Islam. In *zhongyuan*, some Muslim families know of ancestors who had been teachers of Confucianism and were converted to Islam. This demonstrates some of the impact of Islamic indigenization on the population. The second reform targeted the pedagogical approach to scripture teaching. In the past, Islam was transmitted by father to son within the family. Now schools were started in Muslim communities and scriptures were taught by contracted *jingshi*, which meant that anyone who was willing to learn could go to school.

The commencement of women's education was the third reform. *Zhuanpu* contains only a few comments on women's education. But these few comments provide enough information to conclude that the education of women was carried out in two ways: one was to set up women's schools, the other was to start night schools for women in mosques. In a society which largely ignored women's education (with few exceptions, see Dorothy Ko, 1992), setting up women's schools and attaching central importance to women's religious education was a very progressive step.

Discovery of Women's Roles

We argued above that due to the unencumbered expansion of Muslim culture in 'the era of consolidation' in China, the major contribution women were expected to make was to reproduce and care for the family. From the Ming Dynasty onwards, as the social position of Muslims continued to decline and Islamic religion became estranged from its believers, men began to reconsider the role of women. Scattered among the Han people in small groups, Muslims in the *zhongyuan* region found themselves a besieged, discriminated minority. For instance, in Henan, a province in *zhongyuan* with a comparatively large number of Muslims, they were only one percent of the total population. With a different religious belief and way of life, Muslims were conscious of environmental pressures. But as an old saying puts it: 'those who share the same anxiety tend to unite'. Muslims in the region developed the 'characteristics of a strong sense of justice, of chivalry, and an emphasis on solidarity' (Li & Feng, 1985:253). External pressure also affected male and female relationships in the Muslim

communities.

Men came to see the important role women could play in maintaining the Islamic belief and its cultural traditions. The talent of some outstanding women in mastering Islamic knowledge also caught men's attention and won their respect. Indeed, long before Hu Dengzhou created *jingtang* education, there are records of *nu junshi* (female religious scholars of senior rank) from Muslim districts in *zhongyuan* who seem to have come from families of generations of scripture teachers. Prominent *nu junshi* seemed to have enjoyed some status in Muslim society. A tablet inscription dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1622) and kept in the Great Mosque in Datong City has recorded the story of one well-known *nu junshi*, Sumingdashishi, who came from an old *jingshi* family (Li Xinghua, 1994:46). According to the inscription, she came to Datong Great Mosque in the early Hongzhi reign of the Ming Dynasty (1488). 'Having learned [to read] scriptures from her own family', she won great respect from 'teachers and learned scholars everywhere'. Such well-known persons as Zhan Sheng (an inspector who once asked to grant a name for Niujie Mosque in Beijing in the tenth year of Chenghua, 1474), Chen Xun (a high-ranking officer), Ma Zi, Ma Li (religious leaders), Hai Yuan, and others, sincerely requested Sa Yuanji and Ma Xuntong, who came from prominent Muslim families in Datong and Youyu, to invite Sumingdashishi on their behalf to restore and head Datong Great Mosque. Obviously, the *nu junshi* 'enjoyed exceptional prestige at the time' (Li Xinghua, 1994:46). This story indicates that before *jingtang* education came into being, women in learned Muslim families enjoyed opportunities of acquiring Islamic knowledge, and that some distinguished female Muslims attained the title of *junshi*.

Sumingdashishi assuredly had had academic exchanges with 'teachers and learned scholars in all parts of the country', otherwise, she would not have received such accolade. Women of her standing naturally formed only a small group in contemporary Muslim society. We have no knowledge of the exact number of prestigious *nu junshi*, but we can be sure that over five-hundred years ago (in the late fifteenth century) respectable *nu junshi* existed, and women's talents and roles were acknowledged and approved by Muslims. Hu Dengzhou was born thirty-four years after Sumingdashishi became a *nu junshi*. Decades later, Hu initiated religious education for all, and his followers took care to bring into full play Muslim women's capacities by establishing schools for common Muslim women. Thus women began to play a greater part in preserving and transmitting Islamic religion.

Zhuanpu has recorded an account of how women helped in the resurgence of faith. When the *jingshi* Ma Rongwu heard that a Muslim community in

Tongzhou (now Dali County in Shaanxi) was surrendering the religion of their ancestors, he collected some money and took his students to stay at a mosque in one of the villages in Tongzhou County. There were about 300 households in the village, some had already begun to raise pigs in violation of Islam. When Ma and his students arrived, instead of going into homes, they stayed in the mosque where Ma Rongwu continued to teach his students. At first, the villagers feared Ma's condemnation and sought to compel him to retreat by piling up snow outside the gate of the mosque. However, Ma refused to take the bait, instead befriending the village children playing outside the mosque gate. He soon won their hearts and more of them came to the mosque. About a year afterwards, Ma began to teach these children some Islamic knowledge. Always welcoming and gracious, he talked to visitors about Islam only when asked to. Gradually, the number of children receiving instruction increased, and some old villagers began to invite Ma and his students to visit their homes. In this way, Ma successfully familiarised the village with rites of worship and proper ablution procedures. Through the children, he won over their mothers. The compiler of *Zhuanpu* comments that: 'You have to get down to work within the family if you want to spread the religion. Generally, a man will do good when his wife likes it, and one can win a woman's praise and trust by treating her children kindly' (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 70). His remarks indicate an acknowledgement of women's roles.

Knowing well that the villagers disliked his lessons, Ma Rongwu started working first with the children, and by doing so, gained their mothers' favour, who then influenced their husbands. Thus under the influence of women, the villagers resumed a religious way of life. Only then did Ma start to impart to them a deeper understanding of Islamic doctrines. In the evening he would hang up curtains and teach; many women came to his instruction to express remorse and confess their sins in tears. In about six years, an Islamic culture had returned to about 1,000 households in the seven villages in Tongzhou County (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 70).

Zhuanpu tells also of a woman in Bozhou, Anhui Province, who exerted crucial influence over her husband. He, being a gifted student, was sent at an early age to a traditional Chinese private school where his teachers sought to win him over to Confucian scholarship. However, persuaded by a *jingshi*, the student Li gave up Confucianism and decided to receive instruction from She Yunshan, a notable *jingshi* in Kaocheng, Henan. His decision won the family's support. Three years later, he asked for leave and went to see his family. Everyone in the family was happy except his wife, who locked herself in her room and refused to see her husband. 'When Li asked why, she said: When I was doing the housework and serving your parents, I expected to see you back after completion

of your studies. I don't want to see you before your study is over. What is the point of seeing you if I cannot celebrate your success? On hearing his wife's remarks, Li left immediately. After another three years' hard work, he returned home with great academic achievements. His wife went to meet him in a beautiful dress, and everyone in the family was overjoyed' (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 104).

Though few records of women are included in *Zhuanpu*, the instances recorded sufficiently indicate an awareness of the part women played in maintaining the faith. This awareness formed the background for moves to establish religious schools also for women in Central Chinese Muslim communities.

Nuxue and *Nusi* in the Qing Dynasty

Limited documentation and general oral accounts from extensive fieldtrips allow for only an impressionistic description of *nuxue* (religious schools for women) in the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911). Muslim women's religious education was carried out in different ways in the three regions, namely, in *zhongyuan diqu*, the Southwest Region and the Northwest (Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai) region.

After the Qing Emperor Qianlong's reign (1736), Sufi *menhuan* (brotherhoods) grew steadily in power and influence in the Northwest. Their cruel oppression by the Qing Administration ignited every Muslim's hatred of Imperial Government and a culture of constant rebellion (for interpretations of Qing-Muslim relations, see Joseph Fletcher, 1995; Jonathan Lipman, 1990). In this context, Islam, including approaches to women's education, developed quite separately from Islam in other regions. Religious education was mainly carried out within the family and no records of *nuxue* established in the Qing Dynasty in this region are known to us.

In the Southwest Region, including Yunnan and neighbouring provinces under its influence, women's schools are known to have been established in Qing Dynasty, although we have no exact dates. We know also that there were female religious teachers (called *shimu*, women's religious schools were called *nuzi jingxue*) in the Qing emperor Guangxu's reign (1875–1908). *Nuxue* were established in *zhongyuan* in late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty. Gradually, the schools were turned into *nusi* with *nu ahong* taking charge of all religious affairs. These three distinctive models of women's education reflect the need to situate women's religious, social and family positions in their communities within specific local contexts. We confine our discussion to the latter two models.

Nuxue in the *Zhongyuan* Region, set up by male Muslims in the early Qing Dynasty

In late Ming and early Qing (sixteenth to seventeenth century), Muslim women's religious education was mainly carried out in *nuxue* or night schools. Oral traditions accounting for the history of *nuxue*, told among Muslims in the region, underline their proud and long tradition. In Zhoukou and Jiaozuo Counties in Henan, and in Jining in Shandong Province, it is commonly said that *nuxue* can look back on a history of over 300 years. As for the exact site of the earliest *nuxue*, opinions differ: some point to Henan, some believe it started in Shandong, others claim it began in Anhui. We can conclude that *nuxue*, set up in the course of the Qing Dynasty, were mainly located in Henan and its neighbouring provinces, prominently in Hebei, Shandong and Anhui; night schools were mainly found in Shaanxi.

Only one specific reference in the *Zhuanpu* explains how Ma Minggao started a religious school for women. Muslims in Jining, Shandong, invited Ma to start a *nuxue* because 'of his simple directness and fine virtues' (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 63). Based on this information, we may speculate that *nuxue* were probably started simultaneously with men's religious schools in Jining. The teacher at the *nuxue* was a man. The *Zhuanpu* provides no information concerning the location of the school and nature of textbooks. As the compiler of *Zhuanpu* discusses women's role in maintaining Islam and *nuxue* in an approving tone, other women's religious schools must have been in those areas under the influence of the Shandong School of Islamic Learning. She Yunshan, the advisor to *Zhuanpu*, will have kept in mind his prominent teacher Chang Zhimei's mission to provide Islamic education for all Muslims. Under his teacher's influence, he would be inclined to promote women's religious education wherever he engaged in teaching.

The textbooks that have been used specifically for Muslim women's religious education in *zhongyuan* also provide certain historical clues. A two-pronged approach to education targeted on the one hand common believers, teaching them basic ritual and religious knowledge; while on the other hand the cultivation of *nu ahong* (acting as female instructors) was a major concern. The latter was divided into two stages: primary and advanced education. Education in the primary stage was the same for men and women. They attended basic religious courses, acquired the rudimentary of Arabic language, studied Islamic history, and immersed themselves in the *haiting* (selected texts from the Koran) and *zaxue* (prayers to accompany rites of ablution, worship, fasting, burial), and other texts. At advanced level, students studied the scriptures in the Persian

language. Five of the canonical texts were considered the most fundamental (see below), and their mastery was a prerequisite for *nu ahong* status. Upon completion of her studies, a *chuanyi guazhang* (graduation) ceremony was held which marked the threshold to an elevated status as teacher.

But it seems that more than five texts were taught in most *nuxue*, with students in some schools being taught from over ten texts. These included *Haiwayi Minahazhi*, a Persian grammar book compiled by Chang Zhimei, and some Persian canonical texts generally studied by male *ahong*. Arabic-language texts were not required reading in women's schools. All traditional textbooks for women's education were in Persian, the most fundamental five of which were called *nurenjing* (scriptures for women). The first three books of *nurenjing* cover the fundamentals of Islamic belief, the mastery of religious rites, and religious duties incumbent upon a Muslim woman, with special attention to menstruation, pregnancy and lying-in periods. Book Four includes religious knowledge which concerns the spirituality of women. Book Five addresses the cultivation of women's virtues, provides an outline of Islamic history, and sermons about saints. The first two books were widely distributed in Central China during the Ming and Qing Dynasties and entitled *Fesuli* and *Muximati*. *Fesuli* was translated into Chinese by Zhang Zhong (ca. 1584–1670), a *jingshi* from Suzhou, and entitled *Sipianyaodao* (Yang Huaizhong & Yu, 1993:79–80). The translation of *Muximati*, entitled *Jiaokuanjieyao*, was compiled in Emperor Kangxi's times (1662–1722) by Ma Boliang, an early Qing Dynasty Islamic scholar from Jining, Shandong, and influential in Muslim communities all over the country. In the other three books, the editors only explain their reasons for compiling these books, and give no dates.

The preface to Book Four states that it was written specifically for women. Judging by the history of Muslim women's religious education, it was likely written as a textbook for women at a time when *nuxue* were first established. Based on the fact that they formed part of the core textbooks for women's education in *zhongyuan* and were written in Persian, we may infer that they were composed early during the Ming and Qing Period, and subsequently spread to Muslim communities elsewhere. As for why Persian canons were selected, one possible explanation is that the great majority of Muslims who moved to *zhongyuan* in the Yuan Dynasty spoke Persian (Yang Jiguo, 1996:37), which made it comparatively easier to learn Persian than Arabic. Later, to teach only Persian scriptures in *nuxue* became a distinguishing, and sacrosanct, tradition of women's culture.

Ordinary Muslim women were asked to learn *qingzhenyan* (core professions of Islamic faith) and *zuozhengyan* (the vow of Muslim faith), eighteen *suole*

(chapters from the Koran for popular use), and the general rites of Islamic worship. However, many women also continued to study canons which only *nu ahong* were required to read.

Why are no clues left of how *nuxue* started in early Qing Dynasty? To find answers, we analyzed the approach to running a school at that time. It has been a Muslim tradition to carry out education under the most exacting conditions, which must have started when *jingtang* education commenced. When the *jingshi* Ma Rongwu started a night school for women, he only put up a curtain to separate him from the women students. This approach continued into Republican times (80 year old Sun *Ahong* of Beixiajie Mosque, Zhengzhou, interview 1996). Sometimes a male family member would accompany the women to the class. *Nuxue* run outside a mosque might be temporarily established in a private house. When a teacher was found, an empty house might be used, reverting to other functions when school was over. This approach of setting up schools still exists. In Henan Province where *nusi* were commonly built, these facilities were gradually transformed to serve as the sole site for carrying out women's religious education. In Muslim communities in Shandong and Hebei, other models of religious education co-existed.

Some *nu ahong* completed their education in their families. When we undertook an investigation in a mosque in a *Hui* community in Jinan, Shandong, a *sanban ahong* ('non-contracted *ahong* for general duties as she had not attended the *chuanyi guazhang*, graduation ceremony for *ahong*) in her eighties told us that when she was young, because her family was too poor to send her to a traditional school where Chinese was taught, she studied in the house of a s*hiniang* (address for *ahong* in Shandong). This *shiniang* had studied scripture canons but had never participated in the *chuanyi guazhang* ceremony. A Muslim with great fervor for Islam, the *shiniang* started a school in her own house, teaching Muslim girls free of charge. Besides learning the same canons as taught in women's mosques, girls were also taught *woerci* (sermon) traditional stories, illustrating Islamic doctrine and history. Some *woerci* stories had both singing and speaking parts just like traditional local operas (which were not intended for *ahong* studies). Often a girl would get married after some study of texts. As these girls had not received a regular education or gone through the proper graduation ceremony, they could only be *shiniang* instead of *nu ahong* (here the meaning is inferior learning).

A *shiniang*'s work was to *lingshui*, or wash the body of a dead female Muslim. The *nu ahong* of the women's mosque in Linqing, Shandong Province (aged over seventy, born in Darning, Hebei), told us that she had acquired her learning from several *ahong*, male and some female. She stayed with the male

ahong's family, her relatives, for the duration of her study. When the *ahong* who acted as her principal teacher decided she could graduate, local believers organised the ceremony at her place of residence rather than at the mosque. This indicates that mosque education and family-run schools coexisted in Shandong and Hebei, perhaps influenced by models of earlier schooling.

Judging from the fact that *jingshi* in Hunan, Hubei and Guangxi kept a close connection with *jingshi* in *zhongyuan*, *nuxue* were also likely established in these areas in Ming and Qing Dynasties. In this period, many students from these provinces went to study scriptures under some well-known *jingshi* in Central China with some of them becoming famous *jingshi* after returning home. Those government officials who attached great importance to Islam also invited prestigious *jingshi* to teach in their areas of administration. For example, Ma Xiong, a Hui official in early Qing Dynasty, invited quite a number of notable *jingshi* to work in Guangxi where he took office, among them Li Bingxu from Shaanxi, Ma Minglong from Hubei, Chang Zhimei and Li Yanling from Shandong, Ma Junshi from Nanjing, Huangpu Jing from Guangdong, She Yunshan who settled down in Henan, and Ma Huajiao from Hebei (Wong Qianlin, 1991:324). Under the influence of these *jingshi*, the areas likely would have also had women's schools. The distribution of *nuxue* in late Qing Dynasty enables us to infer what distribution was probable in early Qing Dynasty. According to investigations made by scholars during the 1930s and 1940s, *nuxue* (or *nusi*) were found in Guilin, Guangxi, in late Qing Dynasty, perhaps the continuation of earlier forms of women's religious schools.

In early Qing Dynasty when *jingtang* education was in its prime, it was popular for people to invite famous *jingshi* to teach scriptures and for students to travel far to seek knowledge. Considering that the *jingtang* educational model popular in *zhongyuan* had an extensive influence beyond its borders, we assume that *nuxue* established in early Qing Dynasty were not limited to Shandong, Henan, and their neighboring provinces (such as Hebei and Anhui), and possibly were started in provinces and counties stretching from south of the Yangtze to Yunnan, because these areas had maintained throughout a close relationship with Muslims in Central China.

Nuxue in Yunnan

No records exist of the beginning of *nuxue* in Yunnan. Based on local documentation, the earliest records of *shimu* (woman teacher of Islam) appeared in the Qing Emperor Guangxu's reign (1875–1908). When Shunchengjie Mosque in Kunming was reconstructed in Emperor Guangxu's time, two

jiaozhang and two *shimu* were invited to the mosque at the cost of 250 tales of silver and over 30 *dan* rice (Wang Yunfang, 1988:272). In *A Survey of Modern and Contemporary Hui Nationality Education in Guangzhou*, Ma Jianzhao, a Cantonese scholar noted that when *nuxue* were founded in Guangzhou, a *shimu* from Yunnan was invited to start a school in the seventh year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1881) (in Wong Qianlin, 1991:292). Obviously, women's religious schools were not uncommon during Emperor Guangxu's reign. Considering that the *jingshi* in *zhongyuan* and Yunnan had maintained a close relationship during a time when *nuxue* in *zhongyuan* were well developed in Qing Dynasty, we might speculate as to *zhongyuan* influence. Women came to replace men as religious teachers in both regions at about the same time.

In late Qing, the Muslim uprising led by Du Wenxiu failed, and Islam in Yunnan suffered devastating blows (Yang Zhaojun, 1994). Not until Emperor Guangxu's time were mosques rebuilt and religious education resumed. Ma Lianyuan and other famous *jingshi* were instrumental in bringing about Islamic revival. Ma revised the three texts studied by women to make them more accessible. They were, and still are, the fundamental readings for Muslim women in Yunnan (interviews with Na Guangyong, Yunnan Islamic College, Kunming, 1996). Education seems most highly developed in areas such as Yuxi, Tonghai, Kaiyuan, and Kunming in South Yunnan, but most *nuxue* tended to be night schools with no fixed locations or regular schedules. Religious affairs in *nuxue* were managed by the *shimu*.

In Yunnan, two kinds of titles were popular: *shimu*, the wife of an *ahong*, or *jiaozhang* (a teacher). A *shimu* was a title of respect regardless of learning; but the address of *shimu* applied also to well-trained women qualified to set up women's schools. Unlike *zhongyuan*, not many of the women teachers were widows or the wife of an *ahong. Shimu* applied regardless of marital status or of husband's profession. The title may point to the historical function of *ahong*s' wives as religious advisors for Muslim women, a responsibility which later devolved on trained *shimu*; however, the title remained.

Yunnan shared certain commonalties with the *nusi* system in *zhongyuan. Shimu* also worked on contracts, and their responsibilities differed little. Some *shimu* were in charge of teaching only, which was limited to the primary level; some *shimu* were obliged to assume additional duties. For instance, *shimu* in Kunming district 'take the responsibility to teach woman the scriptures, assemble them to chant scriptures, do worship, sew *kefan* [a shroud] when someone dies and wash the body of dead women' (Wang Yunfang, 1988:271). Though *shimu* in Yunnan were respected by Muslims, they never gained the respectful title of *ahong*. Their learning was inferior to their counterparts in

zhongyuan. A *shimu* would mainly study three texts – the first three of the five texts of the *nurenjing* taught in *zhongyuan* – after studying rudimentary Islamic knowledge. Generally, *shimu* could not match the learning of male *ahong*.

Zhongyuan Nuxue (*Nusi*) Managed by Female Muslims in Mid- and Late Qing Dynasty

Women's schools in early Qing Dynasty were founded and run by men and, initially, teachers in these schools were also men. Gradually, they became more permanent in nature, and were led by female *ahong* (or *shiniang*). Although men never withdrew from the domain of women's education, women, however, began to take on the major burden of teaching in areas where *nusi* were commonly built or where other forms of women's education existed. No exact dates are available for these changes; for example we do not know when women teachers attained the status of *ahong*, however, we do know that women teachers of the Wangjiahutong Women's School in Kaifeng were given the title of *nu ahong* in the Qing Emperor Jiaqing's reign (1796–1820). A steel inscription still kept in this *nuxue* or *nusi* dates back to the fourth year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1878) and states when the school was established, the name of its first *nu ahong*, her teacher and her students, which suggests that women teachers appeared in mid-Qing Dynasty. As they took over a male *ahong*'s responsibilities (such as teaching Islamic knowledge, managing religious affairs, etc.), they were called *nu ahong* by Muslims in the *zhongyuan* region no later than the Emperor Jiaqing's reign (1796–1820). Though these schools still kept the original name *nuxue* (women's school), they began to be given the name of *nusi* (women's mosque). Perhaps also in this period, women elsewhere were replacing men as spiritual leaders and religious teachers (in Yunnan, however, learned religious women never attained the title of *ahong*).

How could women have achieved all this given their subordinate position in a patriarchal society? The development can only be understood in the context of Chinese Muslims' social and cultural predicament in *zhongyuan*. In the midst of Han culture, the small Muslim communities (the largest in Henan were around 1,000 in population, very few elsewhere reached 10,000 or more) were vulnerable to the many political fluctuations. To find a whole village or an entire family giving up their belief was not uncommon. Such surroundings sensitised Muslims in *zhongyuan* to external crises and to attach greater importance to the roles women could play in keeping the Muslim cultural traditions. Women were devout and proud Muslims. These characteristics, and their influence as wives and mothers on family members, turned them into an important force in

maintaining the Islam traditions. To an extent, men valued women's contribution over that of men. *Nuxue*, as a source of religious dissemination, marshalled support from the majority of Muslims and thus endured as an institution.

Women's fervour to improve their religious knowledge, and their support for the institution of *nuxue*, also contributed to its development. The desire to study religious knowledge and to understand Islam just as well as men turned some gifted women into great scholars. Muslims in *zhongyuan* respected the learned female scholars just as much as they did the male *jingshi*. Common Muslim women tried in different ways to help in this development, including important economic assistance. We know from another stele inscription kept in Wangjiahutong Women's School, written in the fourth year of Qing Emperor Guangxu's reign (1878), that the old Lady Zhao donated her property to the School.

The double influence, sometimes conflicting, of Confucianism and Islam on *zhongyuan* Muslims is another causal factor. Islam attaches considerable importance to God's instruction that 'both male and female should learn and study'. This command and the realisation that women could play a vital role in fencing off the threat to the existence of their ethnic group, introduced a movement to educate women when elsewhere women's minds were ignored. However, to have male teachers teach female students, even if it was done from behind curtains, was considered improper by both Muslims and non-Muslims, equally steeped in Confucian prohibition. It is also not unlikely that Buddhist temples built for women and run by women all over *zhongyuan* gave Muslims a tried model with which to solve a moral problem and satisfy both Islamic and Confucian needs.

Nu jingshi or male *ahong's* wives (called *shiniang* by *zhongyuan* Muslims) are likely to have provided the first generations of religious teachers. Some had been taught by their husbands, others by members of their natal family. Muslim women would have naturally asked *shiniang* for religious advice and instruction. Historical traces of this beginning can still be found in women believers' address. For many believers, the title of *shiniang* is the more familiar and appropriate one. Only after these first women teachers appeared in Muslim communities, could young widows unwilling to remarry start contemplating a religious career, and receive support from their families and the community.

The steady growing impoverishment of Muslims in *zhongyuan* added to the urgency of reform. 'Nine out ten *Huihui* [Muslims] are poor' became a popular, and accurate, depiction of Muslim existence during the Qing Dynasty. Poverty and ritual ignorance created problems compounded by lack of facilities for ablution and prayer, and the tending to the female dead. In solutions to such

practical problems, *nu ahong* and *nuxue*, or *nusi*, became indispensable to the community of women believers. In this way, a place for women to study Islamic doctrines added further services, enabling women to participate in the rituals of worship, guided by an experienced *ahong*.

In late Qing Dynasty, *nusi* evolved an organisation of teaching and administration, which was both similar to, and distinct from, the administration in a men's mosque. Like male *ahong*, *nu ahong* also worked on contract. Besides guiding their congregation through the ritual cornerstones of a pious life, their days revolved around teaching religious knowledge. Three kinds of instruction had developed; firstly, primary schools taught basic Persian language and the rudimentary of Islam; secondly, advanced education provided for the training of women *hailifan*; thirdly, courses in general religious knowledge addressed the needs of adult women. The choice of educational approach was decided by both the *nu ahong's* knowledge and local demands. In an ordinary *nuxue*, only primary school-curriculum was taught. However, in areas like Kaifeng (it was commonly acknowledged to be the most prominent site of cultivation of *nu ahong*, and many well known *nu ahong* were trained there), where *nuxue* culture was well developed, advanced-level women's schools were quite common. Some *hailifan* were married (mainly *ahongs'* wives), and some were young widows. Motivation for entering such a school might be their unwillingness to remarry, or their family's opposition to marriage. In *zhongyuan* most *nu ahong* were widows. Regardless of the level of education, standardised textbooks (the five texts of *nurenjing*) formed the basis of all study. In most *nuxue* additional texts, such as the Persian grammar book *Haiwayi Minahazhi* and Persian scripture studied by male *ahong*, were also in use. Like male students, female students attended a grand *chuanyi guazhang* (graduation) ceremony.

These educational advances did not necessarily translate into high status and social influence. Generally, *nuxue* were either founded by, or attached to, male mosques. Although some women were in charge of mosque affairs, they depended on husbands or other male relatives for decision and action on weighty issues. Rather than being at the centre of a Muslim community's religious, cultural and social activities (like male mosques), the function of *nusi*, at least initially, was limited to religious service.

Bidaerti: Innovation to serve the Development of Islam

In the process of development, Islam, far removed from Arab culture, was confronted with the problem of how to explain *bidaerti*, the unorthodox, because of innovative ideas and practices which evolved over time. Muslim intellectuals

in China had been anxious to avoid heterodoxy and estrangement from orthodox doctrines. The early Qing Dynasty scholar, She Yunshan, commented on the great efforts made by Hu Dengzhou to set up religious education. He praised Hu for 'having pointed out a way for the coming generations, solving a puzzle that had been troubling people for over a hundred years, distinguishing the unorthodox from the orthodox, telling right from wrong, and managing to do what others could not' (Zhao Can, 1989 print: 2). In *Muximati* (the Chinese translation is *Jiaokuan-jieyao*, see Glossary), compiled by Ma Boliang, one paragraph is devoted to the discussion of how to identify unorthodox opinions and acts. Setting up *nuxue* and disseminating religious knowledge among female Muslims did not violate doctrines. When *nuxue* gradually turned into *nusi*, when *nu ahong* took responsibility for religious affairs, the spectre of engaging in an aberration from orthodoxy required preventive action and detailed response.

In the continuing debate among Muslims the orthodoxy of *nusi* may be subject to argument, but a consensus has emerged that this institution has served to spread Islamic knowledge, to confirm Muslim women's belief, and to ensure the survival of Islam. Furthermore, the institution of *nusi* and position of *nu ahong* were strictly monitored. According to strict interpretations of Islamic law, women are not allowed to *chenghan* (collective worship) or *huili* (celebrations to break Ramadan and to mark the feast of sacrifice). Consequently, the *nusi* followed rules which meant that *nu ahong* do not take the lead during worship, and do not perform *banke* (call to prayer) or *erdebai* (the religious ceremony which terminates Ramadan). However, because of the ignorance of many Muslim women, the rule placed the *nu ahong* in the middle of the first row of worshippers; in this way, women's needs were satisfied without violating the Islamic law. Moreover, regulations for the construction of a *nusi* prohibited the building of a *bangkelou* (minaret), its prayer hall would have no *yaodian* (a tablet or archway which marks the direction of Mecca, thus of prayer), *hutubailou* or *xuanyutai* (a raised platform from which to preach sermons). A *nu ahong's* activity was confined to the mosque. *Nu ahong* and *nu hailifan* (female student of scriptures) generally lived a secluded life unless their service was needed by a family. By strictly observing the Islamic canons, the religious leaders set an example for women in the community. When common Muslim women adapted to outside developments, many *nu ahong* continued to abide by their traditional beliefs. Living a secluded life made these *nu ahong* staunch keepers of the faith, defending their religion, and exerting their influence over women under their spiritual care. This elicited support from those among the Islamic elite whose priority was the preservation of Islamic orthodoxy.

In spite of this cautious innovation, Chinese Muslims treated the question of

legitimacy in diverse ways. Muslims in *zhongyuan*, especially in Henan, were largely in agreement on the significant part women played in maintaining Islamic culture. Thus the building of *nusi* (or at least of a *nu libaidian* or *nudian* inside a men's mosque) was common. Wherever Henanese Muslim went, they built *nusi*. Furthermore, learned *nu jingshi* were invited to other places to teach scriptures which inspired many female *hailifan* to study for the profession of a *nu ahong*.

In Muslim communities where people took a negative attitude towards *nusi*, only *nuxue* and women teachers were allowed. The teaching standard in such a *nuxue* remained low, *hailifan* only studied *xiaojing* (a severely abridged curriculum, as for instance, in Yunnan, where *shimu* were required to learn only three Persian texts). This compared poorly with the standard of male *ahong*, and *shimu* remained inferior in learning. Such different views and praxis made for the uneven development of *nusi* in the Qing Dynasty. They were mainly built in Henan (such as Kaifeng, Zhoukou, and areas to the north of the Yellow River), and in adjacent areas in Hebei, Anhui, and Shandong. Investigations conducted in the 1930s and 1940s (Ma Quanren, quoted in Li & Feng, 1985:1644) indicate that *nusi* were built also in Guangxi, it is therefore not unlikely that *nusi* were also built in neighbouring Muslim communities. However, present information does not allow for more than speculation.

The Second Cultural Movement and the Development of *Nusi*

In early twentieth century, Muslim intellectuals in China launched the second cultural movement to adjust to contemporary social changes, proposing to reform religion and promote education; it was marked by the birth of a modern youth-oriented magazine, *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth), and continued into the May Fourth Movement. Gu Jiegang called it 'the first cultural movement started by Hui educationalists in contemporary China' (Li & Feng, 1985:913). Yang Huaizhong described it as the fourth Islamic high tide of Islamic culture in Chinese history (Yang Huaizhong & Yu, 1995:136). Yuan Shu sees religious education in this period to have made three notable achievements: (1) reform of religious education; (2) wider dissemination of popular education; (3) access for more women to education through establishment of women's mosques (in Shandongsheng Minweiyuanhui, 1991:88).

Like the first cultural movement, the second one was also launched by male intellectuals, many of whom paid earnest attention to female education and religious life. They investigated the function and impact of women's mosques on women's religious education and life, and shared their findings (Li & Feng,

1985). This second movement was not as radical and extensive as the first movement. But in some regions such as the Northwest, it gained a certain backing and educational facilities for women began to be set up in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai where previously none existed.

But *nusi* in *zhongyuan* and certain other provinces continued to develop apace after the 1911 Revolution. In the Republican period (1912–1949), scholars began to link progress in women's status and education with the significance of *nusi*. When *zhongyuan* Muslims were forced by Japanese aggression and civil war, in the 1930s and 1940s, to seek refuge in other parts of the country, the *nusi* tradition went with them. In a way, *nusi* became a yardstick of Muslim women's position (interview with Li Xian *Shetou*, Luoyang, 1992). Although many mosques, including *nusi* in *zhongyuan*, declined due to the ravages of war, the upsurge in *nusi* construction continued into the early 1950s.

Development of *Nusi*

Except for the provinces in the Northwest Region (Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang), *zhongyuan* Muslims made their influence felt in areas between Guangxi and Fujian in the South, and Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia in the North. Throughout history, but particularly in the early twentieth century, and after the Anti-Japanese War broke out in the 1930s, as *zhongyuan* Muslims began to move to other provinces and regions, the tradition of building *nusi* followed them into their new settlements. Muslims from *zhongyuan* moved to Inner Mongolia, the Northeastern provinces, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Gansu. Most *nusi* in these cities, provinces and regions were built by Muslims who settled there from Henan, Shandong, Hebei, and Shanxi with Muslim Henanese playing a leading role. During this time Muslims everywhere quoted the saying that 'the earliest *nusi* was built in Henan, and there has been the greatest number of *nusi* in Henan'.

In most areas in Henan, Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi and Anhui, *nusi* had long been taken for granted. In the wake of the cultural movement, more *nusi* or *nudian* (prayer room for women within a mosque compound) were built in these areas, exercising ever greater influence on the Muslim communities all over the country (see Appendix II).

Besides building *nusi*, many areas also experimented with other forms of women's education. For instance, Xinyue Women's Middle School was founded in Beijing in 1935 which focused on teaching modern courses; a summer class was started in the schoolrooms of Xinyue Women's Middle School for women to study the Islamic doctrines, and to spread religious knowledge. Muslims in

Heilongjiang also expanded the activities of their women's mosque by setting up a school, and teaching in Arabic. Muslim women in Shanghai established women's organisations such as Tongde Association, Kunning Association, and the Shanghai Islamic Women's Association. The religious instructor at the mosque in Quanzhou, an *ahong* from Shandong, started short-term 'Religious Classes for Women and Children' in the month of Ramadan, the month of fasting, in 1936; in the autumn of 1939, Chengda Normal School sponsored a 'Class for Adult Hui Nationality Women' in Guilin.

It is important to keep in mind that the above-described developments did not affect the system of training *nu ahong*, nor was reform affected in the use of Persian standard textbooks, which continued to be used in advanced-level teaching in *nuxue*. However, although men remained the major force behind running women's education and building *nusi*, women in increasing numbers also took an active part in these activities. Three *nusi* in Nanjing were built with donations from women. Those who sponsored *nusi* or women's organisations in Shanghai were all female Muslims. Guo Longzhen from Darning in Hebei, ran a women's school in her own house with her father's backing, in 1909, when she was only fifteen years old (She Zhenguo & Li Heping in Shandongsheng Minweiyuanhui, 1991:137; She Juemin in Li & Feng, 1985:1541, 1546, 1548–1556). The school she sponsored was the first one in the country to teach courses which also took advantage of educational reforms.

Women's Education in Northwest China

Muslim intellectual reformers won support in the Northwest from upper-class Muslims in the Republican period. Beginning in the 1920s, new forms of women's education appeared in the region where it had not received attention previously. In the 1930s, the warlord Ma Bufang and his wife Ma Suqin transformed Shuada Primary School in Linxia City, Gansu, into Shuada Suqin Women's Primary School which enrolled only Hui nationality girls. Later, it moved to Wangsijie Street and its name was changed to Qingyun Women's School. In 1941, Hui intellectuals from Lintan started the Jiuchenghuangmiao Women's Primary School in Lintan County. These schools all aimed at imparting modern, secular knowledge. Besides, there were also schools for teaching religious knowledge. A women's class was started in 1939 in Pingfan Mosque, in Lanzhou, 'teaching both the scriptures and Chinese' (Li Yanqing in Shandongsheng Minweiyuanhui, 1991:206–211). In the early days of the Republic, members of upper-class Hui society founded Tongren Women's Primary School in Guyuan, Ningxia Province. The teaching principal of the

Hufuye Hongmen (a sub-branch of Sufism) founded Hairu Women's Primary School in Hanjiaoshui, Tongxin, teaching modern subjects (Ding Guoyong, 1993:268). In 1940, the Association for the Promotion of Islamic Education in Qinghai started women's education with a modern curriculum, setting up the Kunlun Middle School in Xining City. This Association also founded five primary schools for women with an Arabic emphasis (also called *nuzi jingxue*) in Xining (La Bingde in Shandongsheng, 1991:251).

When the Anti-Japanese War broke out, Muslims from *zhongyuan* moved to the Northwest to escape danger and economic hardship. Since then, they evolved as a distinct regional community with their own characteristics, of which building *nusi* and facilitating women's religious education has stood out as its most prominent features. In contrast, local Muslims in the Northwest continued to confine women at home, and only certain members of the intelligentsia, influenced by the New Cultural Movement, began to consider the value of female education. Their schools were small in number, short-lived and of limited influence. But it laid a historical precedent which was to become the foundation for future developments in women's education in the Northwest.

The Reform in Muslim Women's Education in Yunnan

Yunnanese Muslims also contributed with local reforms to the spirit of a nation-wide New Cultural Movement thus bringing about changes in women's religious education. In some areas *nuxue* were founded which taught both Chinese and Arabic. In 1921, the first new-type Islamic school was set up in Kunming, teaching both Chinese and Arabic. Later, this school was divided into primary and intermediate educational streams, and an Arabic section. The school ran successfully, and cultivated a number of scholars well-known both at home and abroad. Under its influence, reforms were carried out in religious education elsewhere in Yunnan. In Yangzheng School at Shadian in Gejiu a class was specially set up for girl pupils. A Girls Primary School offering Chinese and Arabic 'was set up at Dazhuang in Kaiyuan County' (Ma Shaozhong in Shandongsheng, 1991:309), and Peide Girls Primary School was established at Daying, Yuxi (Li & Feng, 1985:1321). Descendants of Ma Lianyuan, a well-known *jingshi* in late Qing, rewrote in Arabic the three religious texts mainly studied by women to reflect educational reforms. The first three texts studied by women have therefore both Arabic and Persian editions. Yet, in spite of all these changes, the traditional content of the texts and the status of women religious teachers, still called *shimu* (emphasising a relationship of dependency, as wife, rather than as a teacher in her own right), demonstrated the enduring features of

subordination of women's training and education to the education accorded to men.

Female Religious Culture in the *Zhongyuan* Region

When Hui intellectuals initiated women's education in late Ming China to save Islam, they concerned themselves with women as wives and mothers. The *nuxue* education which came out of this great crisis was based on Islamic doctrine and Confucian moral principles, and it shaped women's identity as Muslims: defining their responsibilities and duties in religion and in family life. With the development of *nuxue*, women came to replace men as teachers and administrators. Prestigious women teachers were elevated to the status of *ahong*, and *nuxue* gradually developed into a multi-purpose institution, the *nusi*.

When men incorporated women in a strategy to defend their cultural traditions, they had acknowledged women's power. *Nu ahong* who took advantage of the opportunity to study the scriptures in depth, had time now to ponder the mysteries of faith. Though there were fewer texts for women to study, many famed *nu ahong* found ways of expanding their scope of knowledge, and some of them became *jingshi* who mastered both Arabic and Persian. In teaching Islamic doctrines and pondering women's material and spiritual predicament, they nurtured a unique women-based religious culture. In this they went beyond men's original expectations. Indeed, Henanese Muslims said that religious faith was strongest wherever there were *nusi*.

This culture was not without its contradiction. On the one hand, female Muslims gained self-confidence in their own spiritual powers, reinforced by the emphasis on the central spiritual position of mothers in the scriptures, and by the great religious role models provided by the Prophet's wives and female descendants. Many traditions told of the crucial part played by the women in supporting the Prophet through the early struggles for recognition of Islam. Also, in the course of taking charge of their separate spheres of religious and social activity, women developed a sense of security over the legitimacy of this self-determination, however circumscribed (see also following chapters).

On the other hand, both Islamic doctrine and Confucian morality limited the sphere of activity of a *nusi* which bound this institution into a conservative mould, subsequently to be criticised as feudal, backward and unchanging. The great success of the early Hui reformers in indigenizing Islam reified into a burden of Islamic and Confucian traditionalism. Most notably, *nu ahong*, as keepers and symbolic figures of a sacred tradition, were confined by this stagnation. From the time *nuxue* were founded until the Republican period, the

mosque was a *nu ahong's* sole site of activities; she had little interaction with the outside world. This helped to preserve the educational core of women's mosque traditions, however, it also widened the gulf between *nuxue* education and society and made it difficult to adjust to the constantly changing world beyond the mosque gates.

MAP 5: Distribution of Women's Mosques in 1990s

Chapter IV

Growth and Expansion of Women's Mosques and Schools

Continuation of the Islamic Cultural Movement launched in the Republican Period (1911–1949), manifests the efforts Hui Muslims have made to adjust to a constantly changing society. The reform which continued to take place in women's education is reflected in the development of *nuxue*, particularly since the 1980s. Whereas educational reform in the Republican era was characterised by a two-pronged approach, Arabic and Chinese, to the education of men, with women barely a visible part either as educators or students, religious reforms after the 1980s show a marked difference. Women are brought right into the focus of education, and by implication reform goes beyond elite education to popularisation of Islamic knowledge. Though initiated by Islamic scholars, the support is wide-spread.

A Prominent Muslim Intellectual and Reformer

Huang Wanjun *Ahong*, from Henan, a prominent Muslim intellectual and reformer, played a major role in shaping the reform movement, including women's education. Born at Baizhai Village (a Muslim village permeated by Islamic culture), Changge City, in Henan, Huang's own religious education enabled him to observe the deficiencies of conventional religious education. He was particularly critical of mechanical learning in which perfunctory rituals took the place of spiritual nourishment and deeper comprehension. In 1947 he began studying in Beiping (Beijing) *Huijiao* Islamic College with Chen Keli (an *Ahong* from Henan, now a prominent Islamic scholar and translator in China) and three other *hailifan*. When the Institute closed in 1949, he was admitted to the Department of Oriental Languages, Beijing University, majoring in Arabic. He was allocated to work in the civil administration in Inner Mongolia upon graduation in 1953. Caught up in the anti-rightist movement of 1957, and later during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), he found little outlet for his talents

and mission. But in 1970, a Hui youth visited him and asked to study Arabic with him. Moved by his fervour for knowledge, Huang began secretly to teach the young man and his friends Arabic, ignoring the trouble such behaviour might bring to him. By 1976, his class increased to sixteen Arabic classes in Huhehot alone. They all began to pursue actively a more modern Arabic education, which was co-educational, when the Cultural Revolution came to an end. At first, male and female students were taught separately in the traditional way, but then considering the opportunities this offered to young Muslims to make friends and find a spouse, co-education became the dominant model.

The proposal by Huang Wanjun *Ahong* includes, apart from modernising educational approaches, reform in women's education. He proposes that women should be allowed to study modern Arabic canons just like the male Muslims instead of Persian, as this is still the praxis in *zhongyuan*. Huang *Ahong* insists that women and men must have access to different kinds of schooling: *nuxue, nusi,* or co-educational facilities run by a mosque or outside mosque organisation to suit different needs and circumstances. Pertinent to our concerns, this influential *ahong* demands for women to have equal access to religious doctrines, traditions and interpretations instead of adherence to historically set limitations (see Chapter III and Glossary). *Nu ahong* can only enjoy equal status and respect if founded in learnedness and piety which requires overcoming the mental and spiritual confinement set by *nusi* educational tradition.

The new educational paradigm, enunciated by Huang *Ahong* and spread by his followers in Huhehot, soon extended to Muslim communities in Linxia, in Gansu, and then to Ningxia and Yunnan, and subsequently to the rest of Muslim China. Where the ignorance of local Muslim women and low public profile constrained their ability to organise, men have made major contributions to women's education by establishing *nusi* or *nuxue*. Yang Yunting *Ahong* at Chongxing Mosque in Lingwu County, told us that women were the roots of mankind (Interview, October 1995). If confined to the house, they could not see the truth and would get lost in spiritual darkness. For example, ignorance of their rights enshrined in the Koran and traditions made some Muslim women resign themselves to low education and low domestic and public status to the point that suicide became their escape from misery, as it happened in Lingwu. Women must take part in mosque life to do good for family and society. In his second term of office, Yang *Ahong* finally set up a *nusi*, supported by the county administration, and invited a *nu ahong* to teach. His third office at the Great Mosque, in Chongxing Town, has again confronted him with the educational limitations which even this local *nusi*, set up for about one year, is unable to overcome. Poorly qualified *ahong*, male and female, make for poor instruction.

Yang *Ahong*'s task to promote education is only at the beginning, he says, and women's education must be central to Muslim strategies for reform: neither personal spiritual growth nor the necessary raising of collective religious awareness can take place without them. The historical parallels are striking.

With the recent Islamic cultural renaissance which began in the 1980s, women's education features the study of modern Arabic and modern pedagogy. It is supported by the large congregations of Muslim people who act outside any organisational structure. Modern ideas are coupled effectively with the revival of an old tradition of the itinerant scholar, nowadays women as well as men, who go wherever a learned *ahong* is willing to instruct them in the deeper knowledge of the scriptures. The educational movement has also spread so quickly because it relied on traditional extensive Muslim networks, on respect for scholars whose reputation is part of popular debates and great pride, on intensifying desire among Hui Muslims to preserve distinctive ways of life, and on a common awareness of the predicament of religious education and need for radical reforms, and support for reforms.

Terms and Terminology from a Women's Religious Culture

Supporters and advocates of various educational methodologies have engaged in interesting debates over appropriate terminology, and disagreements have become unavoidable in which the government refrains from participating directly as since the 1980s (reaffirmed in the so-called White Paper on 'Freedom of Religious Belief in China', issued by the Information Office of the State Council, Beijing, October 1997), women's religious education has again become a matter for local Muslim communities.

On the evening of 8 October 1995, soon after arriving at the county seat of Tongxin, Ningxia, we met a Muslim woman, wearing a white cap. When we asked her if there were any *nusi* in Tongxin, the woman, in her fifties, told us there were several in Tongxin alone, of which Xiguan *Nusi* had the most *nu ahong*. Last year, her daughter studied the scriptures there after completing her senior high school education. She visited there once. There were about 100 people taking religious classes in Xiguan *Nusi*. In the *nusi* near her house only one *nu ahong* was in charge of education. She thought it was good to have a *nusi*.

The following day, we went to the Xiguan *Nusi* only to find that the so-called *Nusi* was a women's school run by Xiguan Mosque. Local Muslims call both *minban* (informal) and mosque-based Koranic schools for women *nusi*. In the Northwest Region where few or no *nusi* (women's mosques) have been built, the

nusi, the new-type *zhonga nuxiao* (Chinese-Arabic School) and the *nuxue* (Koranic school for women) are all usually referred to under the blanket-term of *nusi*. In Henan where *nusi* has the longest history, the two names (*nusi* and *nuxue*) also coexist and are often confused, but equally often held to connote distinctly differing histories and aspirations. It is therefore crucial to problematise and contextualise the terms which have grown out of specific historical circumstances and which answered to particular needs. Our knowledge comes from general definitions based on our investigations, understanding of historical developments and present usages of terms which form part of Muslim culture.

When Muslims refer to women's religious life and education, various names and terms are used inter-changeably: *nusi* (some elderly Muslim women in the Hui community in Jinan refer instead to *nu shaoma*), *nudian* (also called *nu dadian, nu shidian, nu libaidian*), *nuxue* (*nuzi jingxue*), and *zhonga nuxiao* (*nuzi ayu xuexiao*). *Nu abong* are also addressed as *nu jiaozhang, shiniang* (*shimu*), *nu jiaoyuan, nu hailifan* (or *nu mania*). The complex usage of these terms intimates the multiple forms in which Muslim women's religious life and education coexist in China.

A *nu ahong* (still called *shiniang* in many areas and regions) is in charge of all religious affairs in a *nusi*. Whether she also attends to the dead (*maiti*) and burial rite (*lingshui*) varies from place to place, depending on need for income as much as personal qualification and local practice. *Nu ahong* who are qualified to teach at advanced level, generally will not wash *maiti* or perform *lingshui*. As women do not attend services such as *chengban* (collective worship) or *huili* (celebrations of breaking the fast and the day of sacrifice), female religious professionals are honoured with the title of *nu ahong, nu jiaozhang*,or *shiniang*, instead of *imam* (particularly the case in Northwest China). Thus in Lingwu and Wuzhong in Ningxia, male *ahong* are appointed to serve as *imam* to some newly-built *nuxue*. Chongxingzhen Nusi (which has the functions of a *nuxue*) in Lingwu has invited a *nu ahong*. Her father acts as *imam*.

The Islamic *jingxueyuan* (Islamic colleges) as run by the Islamic Association are small in number and rarely enrol female students. When the Shandong Islamic Association started its first religious training class, only two girl students were admitted (both became *nu ahong* after graduation). From our investigations in Shandong, in May 1995, we learned from the person in charge of the Provincial Islamic Association that the County Islamic Association had applied to run a training class for *nu ahong* which was to start in the latter half of the year. In the Yunnan *Jingxueyuan*, founded in 1987, we learned that only five woman students had ever been admitted (as of October 1996). In provinces

which have a long and rich history of *nusi*, local Muslims are free to choose their preferred way of training *nu ahong*, that is: the traditional way of instructing a *hailifan* in a women's mosque, or the reformers' modern curriculum in a school setting, both practices coexist, sometimes even complementing each other.

The term *qingzhen nusi* refers to locations specifically set aside for Muslim women's religious activities, mainly functioning in three ways: providing (1) for ablution facilities, for religious rites and preaching; (2) for basic religious education of women and children, and for the training of *nu ahong*; (3) for other religious and communal services (e.g., chanting scriptures and washing female corpses). *Nusi* are now increasingly gathering places for Muslim women, and elderly women often seek out the mosque to ponder issues of communal and personal interest; trusted *nu ahong* will be invited to mediate quarrels or disputes between family members or neighbours; some *nusi* have even considered setting up a day care for the old or some other charitable services. On the whole, newly-built *nusi* tend to expand into multi-functional institutions in response to women's increased demands and expectations.

The term *nu libaidian* refers to part of the larger space of a men's mosque set aside specially for Muslim women to perform religious rites. Its function is confined to worship, thus no need exists for contracted *nu ahong*. A *shuifang*, or room for performing ablutions, is always attached to the *nu libaidian* and sometimes a separate gate is built for women to enter the mosque separate from men. Some *nu libaidian* built after the 1980s do not have a separate gate, and men and women enter the mosque together.

Nuxue, also called *nuzi jingxue*, is a special institution to facilitate women's religious learning. As described in the previous chapter, the earliest *nuxue* arose in Henan and Shandong, and in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, *nuxue* gradually evolved into *nusi*. However, in Muslim communities in Henan, both its name and educational mission persist. Some elderly Muslim women even prefer the term *nuxue* to *nusi*. The oldest *nusi* in China, the Wangjiahutong *Nusi* in Kaifeng, as of February 1996, still displayed the original characters of *Qingzhen Nu Xuetang* on its main gate. The *nu shetou*, in her late sixties, did not know the name of the calligrapher but she obviously took great pride in the title *Nu Xuetang*. She told us that the inscribed board had been passed on from generation to generation, and that *Qingzhen Nu Xuetang* was a name carried with pride. Apart from Kaifeng, a number of *nusi* in Zhengzhou and Zhoukou still carry the name of *nuxue*. In these cases, so-called *nuxue* in *zhongyuan* have long ago transcended pure educational functions and become fully-fledged *nusi*. However, to complicate the picture, other communities rank a *nusi* at a higher level of social and religious evolution than a *nuxue*. When such

nuxue, originally attached to a men's mosque, gain independence, this is generally marked by a change of name to *qingzhen nusi*. For example, Duizhou *Qingzhen Nusi* in Zhengzhou was situated in a side-wing of the *nansi* and called *nuxue* prior to the completion of a new building in 1996; now nearly as large as the *nansi*, women have their own *qingzhen nusi*, the change of name a proud indication of a higher status.

After the 1980s, *nuxue* tend to be sponsored either by mosques, any other Muslim institutions, or by individuals. Of those run by mosques, some are the initiative of a *nansi* (in areas without *nusi*), while most are set up by *nusi. Nuxue* sponsored by other institutions or individuals are either set in a fixed site or in some individual's house. In *zhongyuan*, traditional place of origin of women's education and *nusi*, and in provinces and cities under the influence of Muslims from *zhongyuan*, the *nuxue* appears most commonly as one of the responsibilities of *nusi*.

In the Northwest region (Ningxia, Gansu and Qinghai) where few or no *nusi* exist, *nuxue* are set up in ways similar to the earliest stages of *zhongyuan* women's culture. *Nuxue* in Northwest communities can be seen attached to mosques, or are organised by individuals. The number of the former has surpassed that of the latter. All *nuxue* aim at imparting Islamic knowledge, and some teach in addition general knowledge of Han culture or even vocational courses. They can be found in a back room of a mosque or in classrooms which are purpose-built. In a *nusi*, the classroom building is often a main room. Some *nuxue* have built *nu libaidian* for Muslim women to facilitate worship also during study time. But most *nuxue* have classrooms only. A *nuxue* set in an individual's house is comparatively simple.

Women's religious education in the Southwest (mainly in Yunnan) is similar to that in *zhongyuan* and a function of mosque-based activities. However, the terminology differs. *Nuxue* are called *nuzi jingxue*, *nuxiao, zhonga nuxiao*, or *qingzhen nuzi xueyuan*, while *nu jiaoyuan* (women teachers) are addressed as *ahong*, *shiniang*, *shimu* or *laoshi*. Their sole occupation is to teach, and they usually do not participate in other religious activities. But in some areas in Yunnan (for instance, in Kunming) *nu jiaoyuan* are functioning more like the *nu ahong* in *zhongyuan* and are charged with additional responsibilities (see Chapter III).

Although *nuxue* which sprang up after the 1980s are generally grassroots initiatives, they also have the support of local women's organisations or other institutions in certain areas. Regarded as an effective educational facility, apart from constituting a source of religious knowledge, the *nuxue* is considered also a tool for wiping out illiteracy and popularising vocational training for women.

Since the 1980s, *nu libaidian* have been added to many *nuxue*, whereas *nusi* have begun to pay attention to education incorporating the function of a *nuxue*. In some areas in the Northwest, for instance, in Lingwu and Wuzhong in Ningxia, no clear distinction between the two is made and both terms, *nuxue* and *nusi*, are used interchangeably.

Zhonga nuxiao (Chinese-Arabic women's school) education belongs to secondary school education and falls into two categories. The first is officially registered education initiated by the masses. Curriculum and educational aims are different from traditional religious education. Arabic is taught based on ordinary university textbooks (as used by Peking University, Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute, etc.). Apart from religious instruction on the Koran and Hadiths, the curriculum also includes Chinese, world history, and other courses covering general knowledge. Instead of training *ahong*, these schools aim at cultivating middle-level religious personnel who not only master Arabic, but also acquire certain religious accomplishment. Graduates of *zhonga nuxiao* are free to enter a career of their choosing. Many of them join the new generation of teachers in religious education, others choose to go abroad for further studies, and again some graduates shift their emphasis to other specialisation.

The other category of *zhonga nuxiao* includes all unregistered schools. They exist in the form of traditional *hailifan* education, are based at mosques, and target the cultivation of *nu ahong*, *nu jiaoyuan*, or simply women with religious knowledge. This kind of school can be found all over Central China in areas with a tradition of *nusi*. While the curriculum in registered schools covers more general knowledge courses; the latter category focuses almost exclusively on religious courses. The *nu ahong* tends to do most of the teaching, occasionally supplemented by full-time or part-time teachers invited by the school. Facilities are simple, reflecting economic circumstances, but *libaidian* and ablution rooms form part of a religious environment. These schools are generally small, and the classrooms take up most of the space. Where *nuxue* are attached to women's mosques, students live, eat, study and worship in the *nusi* and are called *hailifan* locally. *Nu hailifan* often assist in traditional religious activities, such as accompanying *nu ahong* to homes to chant scriptures, and other activities which serves their training and relieves the *ahong* from otherwise relentless rounds of duty.

Zhonga Xuexiao (co-educational Chinese-Arabic school) represents a new kind of school. Similar to women's schools, *zhonga xuexiao* can be the outcome of grassroots initiative, registered with government departments, and offering secondary middle school education in modern Arabic, Islamic civilisation and general comprehensive education. Although male and female students receive a

wide-ranging education, they are still addressed as *hailifan* by locals. Indeed, a number of graduates will always choose the career of *ahong*. The *hailifan* education sponsored by mosques attaches more importance to religious education, teaching Islamic doctrines and interpretations at an advanced level. In areas where there is a *nusi*, female students will live, eat, and worship in their own mosque but go to study in classrooms attached to *nansi*; in areas where there is neither *nusi* nor *nu libaidian*, a special room is set aside for segregated worship.

Common to all these types of education is a wide-spread preference for female education transmitted by *nu ahong*, at a *nusi*, the traditional site for women's education and worship. *Nuxue* and the new-type *zhonga xuexiao* are institutions specifically set up for education, though they may have a *libaidian* or a room set for the students to do religious service, and thus far less appealing to traditionalist Muslim parents of young daughters as they are less permeated by the religious atmosphere associated with a women's mosque.

The Number of *Nusi* and their Distribution

One of the most basic problems has been to conclude a reliable estimate of the number of women's mosques in all of China. The reason for this continued lack of information is related as much to scholarly neglect and government religious policies as to the enduring ambivalence over the presence of self-governing religious sites for women within Muslim circles in China.

When judging the legal position of a mosque, the religious administrative units often refer to the rules for the administration of location for religious activities. Any mosque will gain legal recognition if it fits all the requirements (see also Chapter VII for more detailed discussion). While some women's mosques have been utilising these opportunities to gain a legal position in society and independence both in finance and administration, official statistics do not distinguish between *nansi* and *nusi*. Also, respondents, on the whole representing men's mosques, do not record such developments as might have taken place in their *fang*. Therefore a general consciousness exists of women's mosques growing number, but no accurate census has been taken which documents women's inroads into traditional male prerogatives.

Certain Islamic Associations at provincial, city or district level, document and publish the history and current developments which affect local Muslim communities under their responsibility. *Nusi*, where there are any, are beginning to be noted, but these statistics are not yet reliable. A more conceptual kind of problem underlies the official policy of considering attached mosques (a *nusi*

situated inside a men's mosque) as forming one single religious unit, that is, a men's mosque with provision for women's religious needs. As only fully independent *nusi* are included in the statistics, *nusi* attached to a *nansi* are not in evidence on paper. Neither are those *nusi* without resident *nu abong*, or open only on temporary basis, taken into account as such arrangements do not fit official criteria of what constitutes a legitimate site of worship.

The compilation of statistics on this whole spectrum of *nusi* thus becomes an impossible task. This following presentation is therefore only to be thought of as a preliminary contextualisation of the problem which besets any attempt to establish numbers and distribution patterns of *qingzhen nusi* in China.

When taking a view of the whole country, *zhongyuan* still appears as a region with a comparatively greater number of *nusi*. Since the 1980s, some of the old *nusi* have been restored or rebuilt gradually, and new ones added to areas previously without. Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Shanxi have more *nusi* than other provinces. But a number of *nusi* have been built also in the Northwest and Southwest, and compared with pre-1949, the number of *nusi* in the Northwest has increased greatly. *Nusi* have been rebuilt in the Southwest, mainly in Yunnan province, in smaller numbers. In areas to the south of the Yangtze River (such as Nanjing, Suzhou), the old *nusi* are yet to be restored. In the Northeast Region, some old *nusi* are also reopened but numbers are more or less static. *Nusi* in Northwest and Southwest China however are reappearing in greater numbers. Following is a general overview of *nusi* based on our current investigation.

Henan Henan Province shows the highest number of *nusi*. According to statistics compiled by the Henan Islamic Association in 1996, ninety-one *nusi* are known to function in line with official criteria, amounting to about one-seventh of the total number of *nansi*. If attached and semi-attached *nusi* were listed, the actual number would rise further. *Nusi* in Henan are situated in the Muslim communities in Kaifeng, Zhengzhou, Jiaozuo, Luoyang, Luohe, and Zhoukou, among others. Here the number of *nusi* almost equals that of *nansi* in a ratio of about one to one. In some areas (for example, Qinyang, Sangpo), the number of *nusi* surpasses that of *nansi*. In Zhoukou County, a *nusi* is attached to almost every *nansi*, but independent *nusi* are few. In 1996, we calculated that about fifty to sixty attached *nusi* were set up in Zhoukou alone. None appear in the statistics.

Shandong In the publication *Qingzhensi in Shandong*, compiled by Shandong Islamic Association, one reads: 'Based on miscellaneous statistics, there are over twenty *qingzhen nusi* in the whole province. Every *nusi* is in the charge of a *nu ahong* (*shiniang*) of noble character and high prestige. Though small in size, it is well facilitated and functions similarly to an ordinary mosque. *Nuxiao* where

Arabic is taught is also to be found in these *nusi'* (1992:18). Official estimates given to us in May 1996 suggested that ten *nusi* in all existed in Shandong. But this number did not cover smaller *nusi*, with only a few rooms and without a resident *nu ahong*. According to Muslims in Shandong, many counties in Shandong are renowned for piety, but counties closest to Henan always have the best *jiaomen* (religious culture). Heze County, close to Henan, is traditionally a source of *nu ahong* for Muslim congregations even far away, and more *nusi* have been built there than in other prefectures, showing the marked influence Henan's *nusi* tradition has exerted elsewhere. Zhongshahai Village in Dingtao County is referred to as Little Mecca because of its pervasive Islamic culture, and two *nansi* and four *nusi* provide for Zhongshahai Village Muslims. All the *nusi* are newly built and small in size, and only one of them is headed by a *nu ahong* but they are all the result of grassroots initiatives. If they were recognised, thirty to forty *nusi* in Shandong could be counted, three to four times the official statistics.

Hebei In Hebei, over 400 *nansi* (404 men's mosques, in 1994) compare to about eighty *nusi*, one-fifth of the total, according to information from Zhang *Abong*, Shijiazhuang, Hebei (a man in his thirties, a native from Tianjin, he was active as *ahong* in Shandong, Hebei, Tianjin, and Beijing and is thus familiar with their situation; his father acts as a *jiaozhang*, teacher of the Koran, in Tianjin). Most *nusi* in Hebei are attached to a *nansi*, and have to do without *nu ahong*. In Zhang *Ahong's* interpretation, whilst Muslim faith was highly evolved in Hebei between the Qing Dynasty (seventeenth century) and the Republican era, it is inferior to Shandong or Tianjin. The number of *nusi* and the competency of *nu ahong* in Hebei are no match to that of Shandong. But Henan religious culture outshines all. Unlike *ahong* in Henan who generally study and take office away from their native place, *ahong* in Huabei (North China) tend to be more stationery and many have never been out of their immediate locality. Their connections are limited to their own prefectures or provinces. According to Zhang *Ahong*, *nusi* in Hebei are mainly located in Baoding, Handan, Chengde, and Mengcun, the latter is considered to have the best *jiaomen*.

There is only one mosque in the city proper of Shijiazhuang, and the new mosque, which has a *nu libaidian*, was completed in November 1995. Although a *nusi* has been in existence since the Anti-Japanese War in the 1940s, its lack of heating during harsh winters make its use impossible, and it now serves as a funeral home. Women have turned the kitchen of the *nansi* into a site for worship. But we were told clearly that the women planned to restore the *nusi* and invite a *nu ahong* as soon as they had enough money.

Shanxi The Muslim population in Shanxi is comparatively small, totalling

less than 100,000. But under the influence of Muslims from Henan, many *nusi* have been built. Shanxi Islamic Association figures speak of over seventy mosques in the province (in 1997), more than sixty have an attached *nusi* or *nu libaidian*. Some *nusi* gained independence after the 1980s, and set up their own administrative committee. According to 1997 statistics, nearly twenty independent *nusi* and nineteen *nu ahong* are in Shanxi. Muslim women in Shanxi customarily call the location where they worship a *nusi*, regardless of its size or presence of a *nu ahong*. *Nusi* are most commonly found in Changzhi and Datong. Among the *nu ahong*, a number of women have studied abroad and are thus well qualified to set up modern Arabic Language schools in their *nusi*. In early 1997, 100 *nu hailifan* studied in Changzhi and Datong women's mosques, evoking comparisons with famous Muslim settlements in Henan. The presence of *nu ahong* is highly valued; whenever something happens to a Shanxi Muslim family, members of the family will not only invite a male *ahong* but also a *nu ahong* to chant the scriptures and preside over the ceremony.

Shaanxi The number of *nusi* in Shaanxi has increased since the 1980s, and local Muslims cite the influence of Henan. In 1996, we discovered about twenty *nusi* in the entire province; three are independent, the others are attached to *nansi*. Most *nusi* in the province are located in Xian. Of its seventeen *nusi*, only one is completely independent. The other two independent *nusi* are situated in Baoji and Xixiangxian. The independent *nusi* in Xian and Baoji are built by Henanese Muslims. It is said that the one in Xixiangxian was also built by them. Guanzhong County has attached *nusi*, but the exact number is not clear.

Gansu Gansu is another province greatly influenced by Muslims from Henan. Muslims from Henan remain the major forces behind the restoration and reconstruction of *nusi* in Lanzhou and Pingliang after the 1980s. One *nusi* in Lanzhou is the result of joint efforts of Muslims who moved there from Henan and other provinces in the *zhongyuan* region. Under the influence of Henan Muslims, native Muslims in Pingliang also began to build *nusi* after the 1980s. Ding Guoyong, a scholar from Ningxia, told us that he discovered six *nusi* in Pingliang when he made a trip there in winter of 1992, three of which were built by immigrants from Henan, the others were built by local Muslims.

Ningxia Ningxia is a province in the Northwest where since the 1980s the number of *nusi* has been gradually rising. Although no exact numbers can be given, local researchers maintain that a number of *nusi* have come into being, most of which are located in Lingwu and Wuzhong. According to Tian *Ahong* in the *nansi* in the county seat of Lingwu, *nusi* (he calls them *nuxue*, whereas *nu ahong* and *nu hailifan* in the locality, Chongxing Town, Lingwu, refer to *nusi*) in Lingwu and Wuzhong were set up after the reforms. Lingwu County has over

180 mosques, and about 100 attached *nusi*. Some are common houses next to a *nansi*, turned into a *nusi* to which a *nu ahong* is invited to teach. Many Muslim women study in a *nusi* in the slack season, however, suspending their study when the harvesting season arrives. Women's religious education is greatly influenced by the famous Huhehot *Nusi*, under Kang *Laoshi* (see Chapters III, XI). There both Chinese and Arabic are taught which has in turn affected the replacement of Persian in Ningxia women's religious education by Arabic language schooling.

Based on our investigations (1995, 1996), we would generalise that *nusi* of the kind found in Ningxia mainly target women's religious education, and are often of ad hoc and temporary nature, depending on demand, the season, the presence of an appropriate *nu ahong*. The feature of improvisation also applies to those where local Muslim women continue as long as they feel it appropriate to assemble for religious service without any guidance.

We visited two *nusi* in Chongxing Town. In one we met Wang *Nu Ahong* and a dozen lively *hailifan* (there were over thirty in total, however, many of the students had gone home for the busy harvesting season); the other *nusi* had no *nu ahong*. Both *nusi* were located inside the *nansi*, sharing one gate. All the newly-built *nusi* provide women with facilities for shower, worship and study, and wherever possible, a *nu ahong* is invited to teach. Like *nusi* in the early days in *zhongyuan*, these newly established *nusi* are generally small in size and simple. Many consist of a few rooms in a house attached to a *nansi*. And like the early forms of *nusi* in *zhongyuan*, these too have the potential for further development. Next to Lingwu, Wuzhong County also enjoys a reputation for many *nusi*.

Inner Mongolia *Nusi* were founded in this region in the 1940s. We learned from the Islamic Association of Inner Mongolia that *nusi* and *nu libaidian* in this Autonomous Region are mainly located to the east of Baotou City, but no statistics exist. One independent *nusi* and six attached ones could be located in Huhehot, the capital. Based on information collected from the local Muslims, we know that in Muslim communities to the west of Baotou, people have begun to build ablution rooms, have started women's schools, or have set aside a corner of the prayer hall for women to worship, curtained off from the rest of the hall. Obviously, these are actions made necessary by women's demand for religious education and participation in religious activities. Very likely *nusi* will be built for women when the economic conditions there begin to improve.

Beijing The old *nusi* in Beijing were not restored, but *nu libaidian* and a shower-room for women have been set up in Niujie Mosque and in Changying *Qingzhensi* in Chaoyang District, Beijing.

Tianjin We have learned from an *ahong* from Tianjin, who is now working in

Shijiazhuang *Qingzhensi*, that there are about six to ten *nusi* in Tianjin.

Shanghai One *nusi* was reopened in Shanghai in 1994.

Yunnan Only one *nusi* exists in South Yunnan, in Kaiyuan, which was rebuilt in 1990.

Jiangsu Based on information from Muslims in Shanghai, the various old *nusi* in Jiangsu have not been restored, but some Muslim women are now planning to build *nusi* in the wake of the successful reopening of Shanghai's *nusi*.

Zhejiang A beautiful attached *nusi* in Jiaxing is awaiting the arrival of a new *nu ahong*. Ordinary Muslim women in Hangzhou are also desirous of building their own *nusi*. After the reopening of Shanghai's *nusi* their *libaidian*, set aside by the *nansi* for worship, seems barely adequate.

Anhui *Nusi* restored or rebuilt in the course of the 1980s are located in the western parts of the province, bordering Henan. Muslim women in Shanghai put forth figures of about twenty to thirty *nusi* in this area.

Heilongjiang A spacious *nu libaidian* attached to a men's mosque in Harbin will soon be replaced by an independent women's mosque (as was the case before the late 1950s), the plan of the City Islamic Association and the congregation of Muslim women under Yang *Abong* (see her account in Chapter XII).

The situation in the provinces located south to the Yangtze River, and in Northeast China, is not clear. Xinjiang Province in the Northwest has no *nusi*, none have as yet been reopened in Qinghai. Generally speaking, since the 1980s we have observed an upward trend in the number and importance of *nusi*. But this does not mean *nusi* are accepted by all Muslim communities. In the Northwest and Southwest, where historically *nusi* have been built only in limited areas, very few have reappeared. Muslims in other places still prefer *nuxue*. In Gansu during the 1930s, *nusi* were built by Muslims from Henan. However, as recently as the early 1990s, *nuxue* rather than *nusi* were built by local communities. The same observation applies to Yunnan. Two trends have emerged nation-wide: in the West (mainly in Gansu and Qinghai) and Southwest (Yunnan), Muslim communities develop *nuxue* in its different forms, while in the other regions, Muslims prefer to work within the framework of *nusi* as urgent issues of religious educational reforms are addressed and implemented.

Development of Muslim Women's Religious Education and Distribution of *Nuxue*

Due to differences in local cultural traditions and aspirations, diverse Muslim communities approach women's education in such varied ways that short

descriptions of major patterns of education are called for. Whilst Northwest Muslims prefer the model of *nuxue* in which female students are separated from male students, in Yunnan co-educational schools are more common.

Ningxia Apart from Lingwu and Wuzhong, other Muslim locations in Ningxia (such as Tongxin) have also started *nuxue*, but exact numbers are hard to come by. The distribution of *nuxue* and *nusi* is greatly affected by local Muslims' opinions on the subject. *Nusi* are set up in areas where people think it is good to do so. But in areas where Muslims are not totally convinced of the orthodoxy of women's mosques, those who attach importance to women's education have started *nuxue*, often with the emphatic approval of official organs. For instance, the *nuxue* in Tongxin is seen as successful because it is backed up by the County Branch of the Women's Federation. The co-operation between Federation and mosques have helped to couple women's religious education with Chinese literacy and technical training. We learned from the Tongxin County Women's Federation that this three-pronged approach has provided Muslim women with the chance to study Chinese and learn skills that may help them prosper. It also helps change their traditional ideas. Local Muslim women seem to be anxious to study at such schools, according to cadres from the Women's Federation. Here the model of a modern *nuxue* has won over that of a women's mosque.

Yet local Muslim women call these schools *nusi*, the women teachers are addressed as *nu ahong*, and the women students are known as *mania* (elsewhere called *hailifan*). At an educational level of primary school education, these schools are not running steadily or regularly. Generally, they will start in the slack season but close when the busy season comes; or their ad hoc arrangement will depend on the presence of a *nu ahong*. Despite lack of resources and the often improvised nature of these schools, their benefit to women in areas of lowest female literacy and economic backwardness is undeniable and most strongly affirmed by women students themselves.

Gansu Most women's schools in Gansu were started in the 1990s. The positive role women's schools played in improving women's access to knowledge was confirmed by the woman cadre in charge of the Cultural and Educational Department of the Nationality Affairs Committee of Gansu (once a researcher in the Gansu Nationalities Research Institute, she is also interested in Hui nationality education, and has written articles on Hui nationality women). Schools for women's religious education tend to concentrate in the areas around Linxia and Pingliang, known for entrenched Muslim culture. These women's schools can be classified into two groups: one targets illiteracy, and students' age ranges from under ten to over sixty. Generally sponsored by a mosque, schools of this kind are popular in Linxia. The other group belongs to the technical

secondary school education. Most students are young girls who have at least completed primary school in Chinese secular education. Three of such *zhonga nuzi xuexiao* (Chinese-Arabic Girls' School) were established in Lanzhou, Linxia and Guanghe respectively. The school in Lanzhou is divided into eight classes with a total of over 230 students. Some schools also offer law, accountancy, and secretarial training. Their sponsors describe these as modern education tailored to the needs of minority youths. Our informant maintains that whilst *nuxue* education of this kind arose later in Gansu than in Ningxia, Gansu *nuxue* are developing at a faster and more intense pace (interview, October 1995).

Linxia, we learned from the Nationalities and Religious Section of the city, has two registered *zhonga* (Chinese-Arabic) schools. One was started in the early 1980s, as a result of individual initiative; the other was built in 1994, the initiative of several individuals. The former school operates a segregated education, with female and male students each totalling over 100 students from all parts of the country. The female student section is known as *zhonga nuzi xuexiao* (Chinese-Arabic Girls' School).

Schools run by mosques for the purpose of religious education are engaged in basic or rudimentary education. They are divided into *nanxiao* (school for male students) and *nuxiao* (school for female students). Most students in a *nuxiao* are elderly women, but the teachers are generally young woman who are addressed as *nu ahong* by local Muslims. These women are in fact teachers, for there are no *nusi* in Linxia. The influential *Qingzhen Nuzi Xueyuan* (Islamic Girls' School) attached to Huaqing Mosque testifies to the change in popular attitude towards female education. We learned from local Muslims that there are many women's schools in Linxia City, that a female student section can be found in all mosques whenever financial conditions permit. We counted in our investigation in 1995 a total of over twenty *nuxue* in Linxia. A study published by Jiang Bo and Wang Xiling (1996) confirms the interpretation that women's schools in Linxia are developing quickly. Many schools have over 100 students. Jiang and Wang also mention educational facilities to be found in private homes. These serve the sole purpose of education, only one such private school incorporates a room for ablution and worship.

Qinghai A *hailifan* from Hualong County in Qinghai supplied us with information about *nusi* in Hualong. When we arrived at Xiajiahe Village in Hualong (October 1995 visit), we could see only a row of classrooms newly built against the wall of a mosque, but it has its separate gate. No *nu libaidian* or ablution room for women was in evidence. There the *nuxue* is called *nu xuewu* ('women's study room) by Muslim women in the village, who told us that they

liked the school. Females of all ages (ranging from five to seventy years in age) study Chinese and Arabic. Out of about ninety households in the village, nearly 200 women attend the school. The *nu abong* (wife of the local *ahong*) is in her thirties and comes from Linxia. Muslim women in the village told us that three other *nusi* are in the neighbourhood which are smaller and without prayer hall. Similar to the situation in Linxia, Gansu, women teachers in Hualong are addressed as *nu ahong* and the use of the term *nuxue*, or *nusi*, conceals a very different social and religious reality from their use in *zhongyuan*.

Xunhua, a county next to Linxia, has no *nuxue*. Women of Sala nationality there are not allowed to enter a mosque. The director of the County Women's Federation told us that some young Sala girls have gone to study in Linxia recently. Whether they introduce a trend remains to be seen.

Xining City has a tradition of running Arabic women's schools. In the 1940s, five Arabic women's primary schools were set up, teaching both Chinese and Arabic. After the mid-1980s, some Muslim women set up *funu jingxueban* (Scripture Classes For Women) in private houses, inviting men and women to teach. At present (1997) no other forms of women's religious education exist in Xining except those initiated by local people.

Yunnan Yunnan Province has a comparatively longer history in running women's religious education (Chapter III). The *Nuzi fingxue* (Koranic School for Women) at Kaiyuan Village was first built in the twelfth year of Emperor Tongzhi's reign in the Qing Dynasty (1872) (Lin Yi, 1995). This is the only *nuxue* in the whole province which transformed itself later into a *nusi*. *Nuxue* in other areas of the province still keep the old form. Since the 1980s, *nuxue* in Yunnan have experienced a rapid development. They are mainly set up by mosques and some mosques have built *nu libaidian* for women to participate in collective worship.

Nuxue started by mosques are basically divided in two groups. Traditional *nuxue* concern themselves with women's rudimentary religious education. *Zhonga xuexiao* or *zhonga nuxiao* (Chinese-Arabic Women's School) belong to vocational and secondary school education and adopt modern teaching approaches. Teachers engaged in the former schools are called *shimu* or *nu hailifan*. They tend to be graduates of *zhonga xuexiao*, and are appointed by invitation. Most *nuxue* are found in the Hui settlements of Dianzhong, Diannan and Dianxi. *Nuzi jingxuexiao* are popular at Yuxi in Daying, Najiaying, Gucheng, Dazhuang, Shadian, Eshan, and Zhaotong in Tonghai, and Weishan in Dali. In Shadian, which is also known as Little Mecca, seventeen *shimu* taught in seven mosques in 1983. Most mosques have more than two *shimu*. Having finished at most primary-level education, local Muslim women have to work

hard on three canons, similar to the first three required canons for *nu ahong* in *zhongyuan* which form part of the so-called women's Koran (Ma Hengfeng, 1994). Besides traditional women's schools, some Muslim communities have started setting up *zhonga nuxiao*, of which the women's school in Zhaotongjingpo is most famous. By now, co-educational *zhonga xuexiao* (Chinese-Arabic schools) are on the rise and their impact on women's religious and secular culture immeasurable.

Mosques which attach great importance to their responsibility for religious education seek to provide for all age-groups, sexes, and needs. For instance, co-educational *zhonga xuexiao* have been set up in mosques in Najiaying and in neighbouring Gucheng. Koran classes have also been started for young children, for the old and for middle aged women. In October 1996, over 200 students were studying in the Najiaying Islamic College, which is overseen by Najiaying Mosque, and female students made up over half of the total. Twelve courses are taught, including the Koran and Hadiths, applied sciences, Chinese, physical education, and other subjects. Five women teachers work in the College and a *nu libaidian* is set up for female students' use. A class is also run for children, and a day-time class caters specifically for elderly women, whereas three classes held at night target working women, again divided into different age-groups. Gucheng Mosque has 140 *hailifan* in its *zhonga xuexiao*, thirty-eight of whom are female. Male and female students study in separate classes.

The New Form of Women's Education in *Zhongyuan* and the Role of Men

Whether in *zhongyuan* or in Northwest Muslim communities, men remain a major force in modernising women's religious education. The underlying factors differ. In the Northwest men are a major force because Muslim women in that region have not the capacity to carry out reforms in Islamic education owing to their low social position in family and to their historical lack of public exposure. In *zhongyuan*, the long but static *nuxue* tradition has caused women to become prisoner of their historical advancement in religious education and to become a barrier in the movement towards reform.

Muslim women's religious education in *zhongyuan* has long been in the charge of *nusi* and *nu ahong*. However, the unique education associated with *nusi* and the relative seclusion of *nu ahong* have gradually widened the gap between the achievement of *nusi* education and the requirements society has of education. The urgently needed reform of the traditional *nusi* education is however not within the competence of *nu ahong* to perform, confined by the

very narrowness of their study and their professional brief, a confinement placed upon them by a male Islamic intellectual elite (Chapter II.2). The requisite erudition and experience could only be had within an education that was granted to men. Thus an irony of historical in-built contradictions make certain progressive male *ahong* affect reforms which are most vehemently opposed by female *ahong*. When Huang Wanjun *Ahong* tried to implement new teaching method in Henan, he met with oppositions from his female counterparts.

In 1986, when Huang *Ahong* was invited to Gedandian in Wuzhi County, Henan, he practised new educational approaches when he started a new-model Arabic school. However, in line with tradition and training, the local *nu ahong* insisted on her texts and medium of instruction, Persian. Several of her *hailifan*, all middle school graduates, were critical of the *nu ahong* and her traditionalist ideas. When Huang *Ahong* offered to teach Islamic canons in Arabic, the young *hailifan* struck a compromise. For fear of upsetting their *shifu* (their common form of address for the *ahong*), they secretly got up at four o'clock every morning to learn scriptures from Huang *Ahong*, and then came back to learn scriptures in Persian from the *nu ahong*. Later, when the *nu ahong* discovered their double-life, the study with Huang *Ahong* was discontinued. But the co-educational school, founded by the educational reformer, is now famous in Henan and in neighbouring provinces, attracting countless young Muslims eager for religious knowledge taught by progressive minds.

The reformist response to the crisis in women's education has largely taken place outside the *nusi* educational paradigm. This has happened in two ways: within traditional religious education male *ahong* teach female *hailifan* the similar contents they teach male students. The *zhonga xuexiao* or *zhonga nuxiao* applies modern pedagogical developments and uses general science in a co-educational setting. Confronted with this challenge, different *nu ahong* develop different responses. Some show their opposition openly, some just adhere to their old ways, others may take a more tolerant attitude and allow their *hailifan* to study modern Arabic in co-educational schools. A number of *nu ahong* have even tried to reform from within the *nusi* tradition. But these pioneers are few and far between, and *zhongyuan* has yet to see many such experiments. In Henan, only seven new-type schools have been set up (the Chinese-Arabic schools in Gedandian and in the Xiaolou *Qingzhensi* in Zhengzhou are the most famous), and one or two in Shandong. In 1996, when we went to *zhonga nuxiao* at Zhongshahai Village in Dingtao, only a dozen female students were in the school. The school was set up first in the grounds of the male mosque, and later, when a *nusi* was built beside the *nansi*, the women's school was moved. But every day, a male *ahong* walks over to the *nusi* to teach the female *hailifan*.

Muslims of insight welcome and actively support the new form of education in *zhongyuan. Nu ahong* become aware of the impact even on the most remote *nusi* which is the result of changing and complicating realities. Thoughtful *nu ahong* and Muslim women (mainly members of mosque administration committees) have come to realise that *nusi* education cannot meet the demands of the outside world, unless decisive action is taken. But the coexistence of new and old forms of women's education indicates that Muslim women's religious education in *zhongyuan* is still in the transitional period.

The new forms of education develop quickly in places where they gained support and tacit approval from the government administration. In areas where no official support and thus no resources are forthcoming, Muslims have started a number of unofficial women's schools. As a general view, one can observe a more rapid modernisation of women's education in the Northwest (with the exception of Qinghai) and in the Southwest. Weighed down by hundreds of years of *nuxue* tradition, women's religious education in *zhongyuan* is now developing at a slower speed. However, here too the reform of *nuxue* education appears to gather its own momentum.

Part III

Women's Mosques, *Nu Ahong* and their Religious Culture

Chapter V

‘Look Not at the Evil and Hear It Not’ – From Ancient Persian Canons to Contemporary Female Sexuality

Ancient Persian canons which enshrined the fusion of Confucian social ethics with Islamic principles were passed on from generation to generation of female teachers, among them many female *ahong* who passed their lives in seclusion. These canons have shaped the traditional approaches to female education in matters of sex, morality and health care which are offered to religious women even today.

The first *nuxue* were created by men, along with the textbooks used in these *nuxue*. Up to the present, *nuxue* and *nusi* culture continues to reflect patriarchal notions of ideal religious femininity from late Ming and early Qing. Whereas social and political changes in post-1949 have accounted for closure or revival of a mosque, for intensity of religious activity and size of congregations, the important educational curriculum of *nusi*-based instruction has remained almost stagnant.

Ideas on Sexuality and Sex Education

Education offered at *nusi*, because of its origins in patriarchal intellectual traditions (see Chapters II.2, III, IV), embodies ideas on sexuality of which an historical analysis will help to understand the nature of sex education to be found in women’s mosques and their influence on Muslim society.

Muslims migrated in great numbers to the *zhongyuan* region during a period when salient changes began to take place in ideas on sexuality (960–1850). Although the culture of *taiji* with its worship of sexual congress continued to spread as an important component of traditional culture (Pu Xuewang, 1996), important changes occurred in ideas on and attitudes towards sex. Fang Fu Ruan writes in *Sex in China* (1991):

> Broadly speaking, Chinese attitudes toward human sexuality were open and positive during the Formative and Early Empire ages, but increasingly closed and negative during the Later Empire period. During the ensuing years from 1850 to the present, which might be termed the Modern Period, negative sex attitudes and policies continued under three radically different regimes: the late Ching [Qing] Dynasty, the Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China' (1991:4–5).

In the sexually repressive cultures of Ming and Qing society, rigid sexual taboos caused knowledge of sex and sexuality to be confined to small select circles only, which on given occasions could utilise written or visual materials on sexual anatomy, sexual intercourse and reproduction as well as sex aids and demonstration objects such as copper mirrors, called *jiaohejing* and coins, *mixitu*, cast with designs of man and woman having sex. Men did not talk about sex in public, and women were too ashamed, if they wanted to be considered virtuous females, to mention even a normal physiological phenomenon such as menstruation. In the *zhongyuan* Han culture, sex educational materials for upper class women consisted of the *Sunujing* (*Sunn* in Chinese ancient mythology was entrusted with sexual enlightenment, particularly of brides and young married women) and visual aids, such as aforementioned. When a young lady was about to get married, her mother would present these objects as part of her trousseau. The *jiaohejing*, dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) and unearthed in Henan, and the *mixitu* from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, suggest a long history of sexual education for upper class ladies. In the lower classes, unmarried daughters were taught, if at all, through a mother's or sister-in-law's instruction prior to a wedding; but many families would keep their daughters in the dark, only providing a son with opportunities for enlightenment. Most likely ordinary people in Henan Province, as it happens in present times, have conveyed sexual knowledge through jokes, stories about sex, or by teasing (for instance, married women in Henan often provoke their husbands' unmarried brothers on their supposed virginal condition). It is important to note that during these restrictive times, the religious sphere of Islam allowed women greater freedom of knowledge and expression than was possible in a Confucian-dominated culture.

Islamic Ideas on Sexuality Indigenised

Late Ming and early Qing Muslim scholars, learned in both Islamic scriptures and Confucian philosophy, defined conjugal relationships through the selective use of Han concepts of sexuality: firstly, by presenting sexual intercourse as a mutually beneficial and complementary interaction between the interdependent

elements of *yin* and *yang* (see Chapter II.2), thus preserving the positive force sexuality constitutes in Islamic thought; and, secondly, by imbuing the element of *yin* with the notion of female passiveness, an idea which varies somewhat from original Islamic ideas on female sexuality.

Three late Ming and early Qing Chinese Muslims, namely Wang Daiyu, Ma Zhu and Liu Zhi (see Chapter II.2) exercised greatest influence over Muslim adaptation to the surrounding culture. Wang Daiyu, in his work *Zhengjiao Zhenquan*, turned to the theory of *taiji* when arguing for the importance of sex to marital relationships. He opposed the views of those to whom sexuality was obscene and a source of social ills. According to him, originating from the great laws of universal movement, marital *consummation* was the key to human existence and continuation, approved by God (the supreme ruler of the cosmos, ordaining men and women to multiply), and the foundation of social ethics. 'Thereby to get married is God's demand, anyone who does not do so is considered a traitor to Islam'. Wang continues: 'A general view on phenomena of great magnitude such as the heavens, the earth, the human beings and spirits, and on those small and insignificant phenomena such as insects, plants and trees, shows us that everything, whether imbued with feelings or without, will benefit from *yin* and *yang'*. If the *yin* and *yang* components are not balanced through regular sexual intercourse, one is liable to fall ill or even die. If individuals are thus harmed, society too suffers. 'Many widowers, widows, and bachelors look emaciated and skinny. Staying single results in a variety of evil fantasies, so it is thus no surprise that they would often involve themselves in illicit sex. A physical imbalance between *yin* and *yang* components is the root of many an evil deed'. Wang Daiyu denounced society's convention which required of widowed women to stay chaste: 'True Islam does not encourage the widowed to stay single. Why? The answer is, it is better for one to remarry and be out in the open than to be sexually promiscuous under the cover of chastity' (Wang Daiyu, 1988 reprint: 67). Sexual instinct of men and women is seen as natural and in need of satisfaction to ensure healthy individuals and a healthy society.

However, in his views on female sexuality, Wang Daiyu was close to certain popular notions in Han culture of *yin* as a source of troubling ambiguity, not only passive, and weak, but also dark and dangerous. Islamic scriptures popular among Muslims, such as *Shengxun* (Hadiths; see Chen Keli's translation) and *Weikaya* (*Weikaya Jiaofa Jingjie*, an influential text on Islamic jurisprudence), carry explicit descriptions of strong and greatly seductive female sexuality regarded by Wang Daiyu as a source of wickedness and destruction. This approval of sex but fear of female sexuality led Wang Daiyu to believe in the dual nature of sex. 'It can be both beneficial and harmful to man'. Good sex

takes place in marriage and serves to tame otherwise overwhelming sexual drives. Therefore, ‘good sex is necessary’ and an important dimension of the benefit of the marriage institution.

PLATE 3: A young *nu ahong* on the day of her ordination in front of the Jinan Women’s Mosque in Shandong Province. The Chinese inscription over the door reads *ren zhu du yi* (There Is Only One God). 15 May 1996 (Shui)

Illicit sex, in contrast, is evil sex. ‘Evil sex and obscene words can do greater harm to man,’ because it ‘is harmful to the real virtues’. Evil sex happens when men look at females, whose irresistible attraction brings on uncontrollable lust. Wang reasons that ‘being born of a woman, a man will lose himself in the contemplation of woman,’ and ‘even a good man and a good woman will be overwhelmed by their sexuality if they stay near one another’ (Wang Daiyu, 1988:68). Quoting from an Islamic source, Wang Daiyu warns that ‘you can hunt ferocious beasts and poisonous snakes, but never let a man and woman stay near

one another' to emphasize the importance of sexual segregation of adults. 'Animals will only harm you physically whereas a woman can hurt you spiritually, so you must take great care' (Ibid.). According to Wang Daiyu, Confucius's saying 'look not at the evil and hear it not' is a salient pronouncement on the lure of female sexuality. The prohibition which demands of Muslim women avoidance of all males but their closest kin bears the same mark of anxiety.

Besides borrowings from indigenous cultural traditions, Islamic scriptures and popular Muslim traditions served to illustrate and reinforce a doctrinal point. To dramatize his pronouncements on the dangers posed by women, Ma Zhu tells the story in *Qingzhen Zhinan* (1988 reprint: 327) about a Muslim saint's encounter with an old woman. Thus on his travels the saint comes across an old woman dressed in a colorful costume, her hair braided in gold, and richly bedecked with jewels. She approaches the saint with seductive smiles, but the saint tries to evade her advances. He turns to the right, she, too, turns to the right. He turns to the left, she also turns to the left. The saint however keeps his eyes averted and asks the angel after this woman's identity. The woman is revealed to represent *dunya*, the force which pulls men away from the true path and endangers their spiritual existence. The angel congratulates the saint for his steadfastness as *dunya* represents all that is greed for sex, wealth and fame in this world. The heavily made-up woman embodies the '*daixingde furen'* (evil-natured woman) or woman as the fiendish sex described by Wang Daiyu (see above). In order to be safe, men have to keep away from *nuse* (female sexuality). *Se* in the original meaning of the word described beautiful women, in this Islamic context *se* is used to denote illicit sex. Wang Daiyu believed that no moral armament was strong enough to withstand the wiles of a woman, it is good that Liu Xiahui could keep himself under control when a beauty was sitting on his knees. But isn't it better for men to follow the example of the man in Shandong, who simply kept the woman away from his house?' (Wang Daiyu, 1988 reprint: 68). The only solution was to keep men and women apart.

Whereas scholars presented, interpreted and moulded Islamic doctrines within an overriding conceptual framework of indigenous philosophies and ethnic systems, thus hastening their acceptance but also their overwriting by non-Islamic values, the educational praxis of the majority of Islamic *jingshi* (religious teachers) took a different path. Religious education of Muslims, including education on sexual morality, has traditionally been done orally, and in the medium of *jingtangyu*, a unique linguistic medium combining Arabic, Persian and Chinese. Therefore statements and observations of ordinary Muslims even today on matters of sexuality, are derived from the religious oral culture

grown up around mosques. Unlike the scholarly, written tradition, oral Islamic teachings have been less affected by Confucian ethics. Teachings on matters of sexuality and morality have been conveyed in colloquial terms familiar to Muslims, such as the saying that 'the pleasure a man and woman have together is picked up from Paradise with the pin-prick of a needle'. The pleasure a couple experiences from having sex is a prepayment of the wonderful feeling Muslims will experience in Paradise. Another saying suggests that 'the sexual act is as good as religious cultivation' (*huan yici shui, you woli de pinji*) – *huanshui* in this saying has become a euphemism for sex, its literal meaning is the ritual ablution mandatory after sexual intercourse. Local Henan Muslim also say that 'If a man keeps away from his wife for three days, he is not a committed husband'. The emphasis is on a wife's rightful satisfaction of her sexual wants.

It is interesting to compare Chinese Muslims' ideas on sexuality with those put forth by the Moroccan Muslim scholar Fatima Mernissi. 'Muslim theory considers raw instinct as energy which is likely to be used constructively for the benefit of Allah and His society if people live according to His laws. Sexuality per se is not a danger. On the contrary, it has three positive, vital functions. It allows the believers to perpetuate themselves on earth, an indispensable condition if the social order is to exist at all. It serves as a foretaste of the delights secured for men in Paradise, thus encouraging men to strive for paradise and to obey Allah's rule on earth. Finally, sexual satisfaction is necessary to intellectual effort' (Mernissi, 1987:44). It is female sexuality, thought of as active and destructive, which must be guarded against and women must be covered up or separated from men. Only in this way can men be safe from falling prey to temptation. Sexual intercourse is about husband and wife cooperating to give each other pleasure, and it is the man's responsibility to meet his wife's sexual needs, facilitating thus social order and stability.

In general, Chinese Muslims take a perspective on sexuality that is basically similar to the interpretation given by Fatima Mernissi. The difference in views on the nature of female sexuality is due to the influence of Chinese philosophy and the social contexts provided by late Ming and early Qing society.

Rules for Sexual Conduct and Approaches to Sexual Education

George Murdock classifies society in terms of how it regulates sexual instinct. One class of society enforces respect of sexual rules by a 'strong internalization of sexual prohibitions during the socialization process'; the other class of society enforces respect by 'external precautionary safeguards such as avoidance rules' (quoted in Mernissi, 1987:30–31). Mernissi considers that the difference in

concepts of female sexuality is the key to distinguishing these two kinds of societies. The former holds that sexuality is passive, the latter insists that it is active. In other words, in a society that takes female sexuality as passive, people tend to turn to ethics to regulate sex between men and women, while in societies where female sexuality is considered to be active, segregation is used to control and rein in women. In China, in part under the influence of Chinese traditional culture, women were both regulated by internalised moral regulations (see above) and by external segregation of spheres.

Beginning with Wang Daiyu (1988 reprint), analyses of the relationship between Islam and Confucianism have also entailed criticism of Buddhist doctrines and practice. For example, Muslim scholars criticised Buddhist condemnation of sexual instincts where Islam saw healthy and God-given human needs, the lack of segregation of Buddhist male and female believers, and the absence of distinction of identity and status. In *Qingzhen Zhinan* (1988 reprint), Ma Zhu denounced Buddhism as not distinguishing 'the sovereign from his administrator, the father from his son, the elder from his younger brother, the husband from the wife …' and for not showing 'distinction between the young and the old, the noble and the debased, the intimate and the formal in relationships, and the male and the female … this is against natural law and does harm to human ethics. What is more, it [Buddhism] also forbids marriage and deprives human beings of the pleasure of meat-eating whilst thus encouraging illicit desire and secret dalliances among monks and nuns, and these and lay people' (1988 reprint: 358). In *Wang Daiyu Tan Dao* (Wang Daiyu Debating Truth), a legendary tale featuring Wang Daiyu in conversation with Buddhists, enlightened Islamic doctrine and praxis are contrasted with the dissolute lives led by inhabitants of Buddhist institutions. 'Monks and Taoist believers keep frequent contacts; seemingly they are discussing the scriptures and benevolent deeds, in actuality they [monks] are trying to tempt females and collect wealth'. Even some parents do not permit their daughters to marry but force them to live in the nunnery where they are not safe from 'hooligans' evil designs' even if they desire to be pious and chaste. Buildings on the Temple grounds are places where 'males and females drink wine together; when [they] get drunk, they will have sex shamelessly' (Li Xinghua & Feng Jinyuan, 1985:446–447). The perceived loose morality of Buddhist and Daoist religious institutions showed up the better the benefits of positive approaches to sexuality and its proper channeling into the appropriate institution of marriage.

Liu Zhi took on directly the question of sexual satisfaction in conjugal relations. He emphasized the importance of foreplay prior to intercourse, followed by rest (Liu Zhi, 1984 reprint: 317). It was important for both parties,

not only the husband, to arrive at sexual satisfaction, thus facilitating harmonious and loving relations. In pursuit of pleasure, using sexually explicit language to excite the partner, sexual teasing, and the like, were permitted. Stipulations however applied to the time that sex was not to be indulged in. For example, no sexual relations should be engaged in on the first and the 15th day of each month of the lunar calendar, when there is a lunar or solar eclipse, or when there is a rainstorm. Furthermore, 'No sex is allowed when the wife menstruates or when still bleeding after giving birth. Violation of rule entails a fine, and the money will be given to the poor' (Ibid.). Whilst too frequent intercourse is not advocated, regular sex is considered advisable. In the case of polygamous relationships, each wife must receive her fair share of attention. 'Once the schedule [for sexual activity] is decided, keep it, don't go to another wife's room for the night' (Liu Zhi, Ibid: 317; also see 1988 reprint: 119).

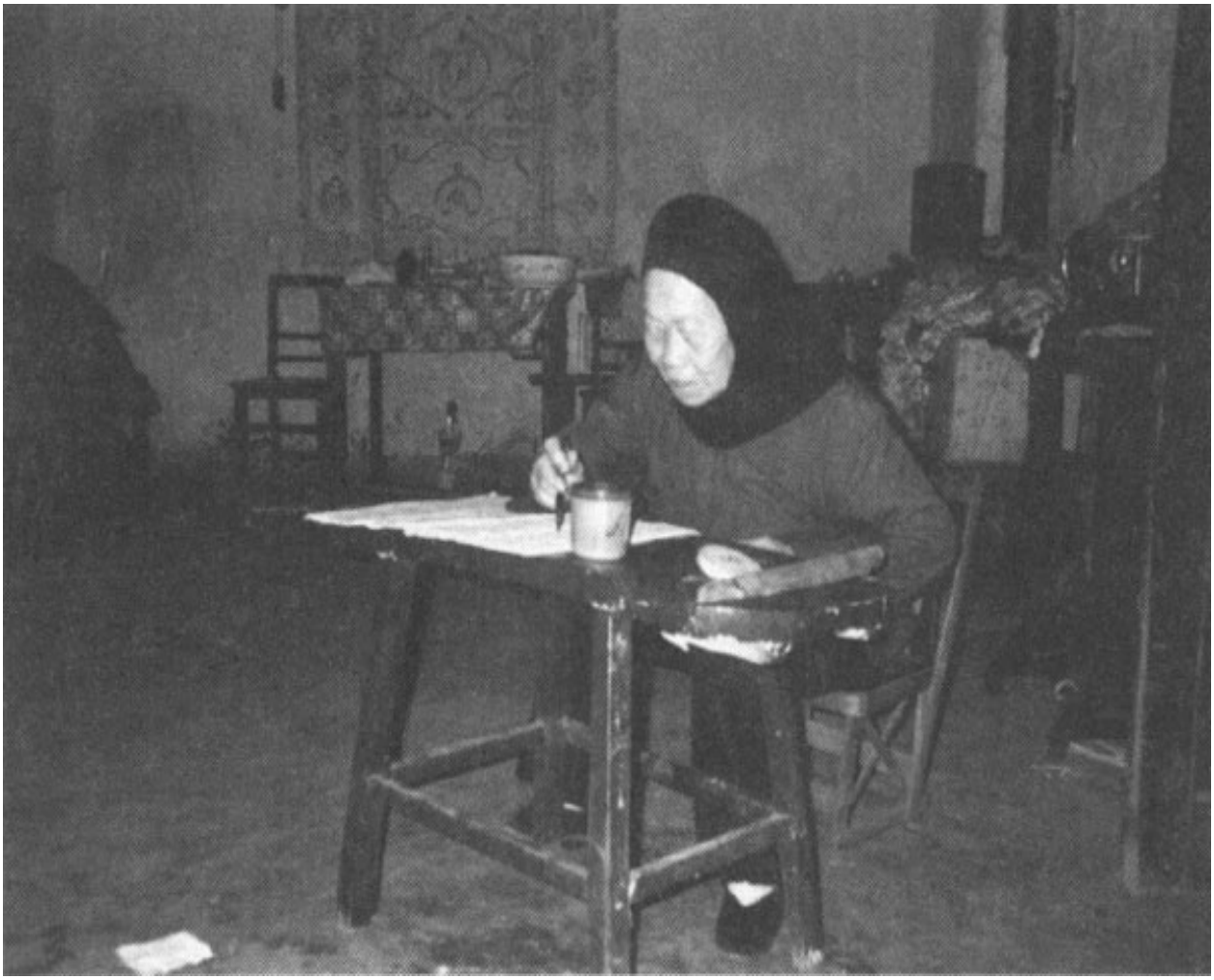


PLATE 4: Zhao *Nu Ahong*, 85 years old, copies the Koran. Hexi Women's Mosque, Zhoukou, Henan Province. 10 October 1996 (Shui)

In summary, firstly, conjugal relations are treated as requiring satisfaction of the sexual needs of both parties, including validation of extended foreplay and sexual games, as only thus marital harmony and mutuality can be ensured. 'The believer with the greatest integrity is one who is kind; an excellent believer is one who shows great concern for his wife's needs' (*Shengxun*, 1994 edition:5). 'To have sex with one's wife is as good as *shisan* [giving alms]' (Ibid: 129). Conversely, women are called upon to be responsive to their husband's needs. 'If a man asks his wife to have sex with him, she should not refuse. Otherwise, the angel will haunt her with evil dreams till morning comes' (Ibid: 340).

Secondly, sexual desires and activity outside marriage are strictly forbidden. Thirdly, conduct of sexual activities must not violate religious laws applying to a woman's unclean periods such as during menstruation and post-natal bleeding. Fourthly, employment of sexual techniques, with the exception of anal intercourse, are welcomed in order to increase the pleasure for both parties.

Unlike Han culture's repressive sexual ethics, where teaching of bedchamber techniques were confined to a small elite, and to even fewer women, Muslim worship with its attendant ritual ablutions for specified unclean acts, including sexual acts, demanded certain rudimentary knowledge of sexual practices and sexual anatomy taught to men and women. Education was either carried out in mosques or in families.

Muslim culture values teaching as instrumental to the acquisition of all-important knowledge, itself the key to faith (see Chapter X). No request for an answer should be refused. If someone does not share religious knowledge that is 'beneficial both to oneself and to others' due to one's 'selfish greed, or if one teaches in order to gain either wealth or others' praise', he or she will enter hell.

'Individual tutoring' (Liu Zhi, 1984 reprint: 273) or tutoring of small groups were, and still are, considered ideal to instruct on sensitive matters of sex and sexuality so as to avoid accusations or denunciations from non-Muslim society in which sexual repression has been the norm. *Ahong* would decide on suitable teaching approach and context. Following approaches were, and still are, common: knowledge bound up with Islamic religious service was taught openly, but with men and women separated. If available, a *nu ahong* or *shiniang* imparted the information to women. In places without *nu ahong* or *shiniang*, the teaching would be done by the male *ahong*, or in a domestic context by the husband, and his wife would be expected, in turn, to instruct their daughters.

Fangzhongshu, or sexual techniques, considered men's business, were mainly imparted to males at the mosque. Advanced students of the scriptures, or *hailifan*, are recipients of such knowledge as well as those with certain religious cultivation and any Muslim man specifically requesting such information from

an *ahong* could then share his knowledge with his wife. Co-existing mosque and family-based education has enabled both male and female Muslims to familiarize themselves with moral instructions and ritual guidelines in formal (mosque) and informal (domestic) transmission, and in a variety of ways and approaches that reflect the elasticity of Muslim communities in their responses to environmental sexual and social mores.

Unlike Daoism with its specific literature on sexuality and sex, *fangzhongshu*, or such literature in the Confucian ethical idiom, *Sunujing*, and erotic artefacts, the *jiaohejing*, (bronze mirrors depicting sexual acts) or *mixitu* (coins with explicit sexual engravings), Chinese Muslim culture takes its sexual knowledge directly from the scriptures, imparted in the context of general religious knowledge instruction. Its main emphasis is on the sacred symbolic meaning of conjugal acts and on knowledge of ritual taboos rather than on sexual techniques. The confirmation of God-given sexual pleasures, for both parties, is unquestionably beneficial to a couple's sexual life, promoting satisfactory and safe sex, protecting women's health and reproductive health, promoting a couple's affection and the stability of family. What is the role of the female *ahong* and the place of women's mosques in the transmission of teachings on sex, sexuality and conjugal relations?

Sex Education at Women's Mosques

Although basic sex education must be considered an integral part of Muslim education, the influence of Confucian culture has caused in some areas an omission of anything related to human anatomy and sexuality. In Shandong Province, Ding Yunhui, born in the late 1860s or early 1870s, spent half of her life time translating *Oumudai*, one of the texts which constitutes the *nurenjing* (an abridged version of the Koran, directed at women), into Chinese. But she omitted everything related to human sexuality and anatomy. In the mid-1930s, Wang Jingzhai, a prominent Muslim scholar, was asked to revise Ding's translation at the behest of Ding Yunhui's son, then an Inspector of the Fifth Administrative Office in Shandong and Commander of the Peace Preservation corps. In the preface to the new edition, Wang Jingzhai writes: '…when women in China try to study the [Islamic] doctrine, their textbooks are *Muximati* and *Oumudai* [see Glossary: *nurenjing*]. Any references to … [sexual] intercourse or … [sexual] tools are usually omitted. This age-old approach has continued for quite a long time. When old Mrs. Zhao [after marriage, Ding Yunhui was known also as Mrs. Zhao] was doing the translation, she, too, omitted as a rule all such comments on these subjects. When correcting the transcript, I have translated

with careful deliberation all of the missing passages so that the readers may be able to read the book completely as in the original. Now that society is changing, we are open to all sorts of ideas. For example, human anatomy and coitus within the context of the science of hygiene, never mentioned in the past, are now taught openly. The Islamic doctrine lays the foundation for male and female Muslims to observe the religion. Although we may only hope to aspire to that which is recorded in the scriptures, however, those who are engaged in its study must learn everything about it' (Ma Zhongping, 1992:68). We can see that as late as the Republican era Muslim women in certain areas were not taught the essential rudimentary knowledge which Islam demands of its adherents. Among elderly female *ahong* and common women worshippers this is still the case.

However, Muslims required to observe ritual taboos relating to cleanliness, abstinence from sex, restrictions on participation in worship, needed instruction; as Chinese women barred from such knowledge, sex education could be granted only under restrictive conditions. The content of sex education transmitted at women's mosques reflects the subordinate position a wife occupies in the marital relationship: conditions suitable and unsuitable to participation in prayer; how to comply with a husband's needs and demands, and how to observe the appropriate sexual behavior pattern.

Strict ablution rules before worship, *xiaojing* (partial) or *dajing* (complete ablution), presume a certain rudimentary understanding of the causes of uncleanliness (sex, menstruation, childbirth) even for the most repressed society. These requirements are considered to be good for women's health, and also good for taming men's otherwise uncontrollable sexual demands. But the latter dimension is somewhat compromised by strictures that ask a woman to submit completely to her husband's sexual demands (even if unreasonable) without a murmur of opposition, thus positioning Muslim women in total sexual passivity. The elderly, conservative Ba *Nu Ahong* (Chapter XII) maintains that a wife is powerless in the face of a husband's demands even when during her unclean periods, but that the sin would be his to bear. A woman, given her helplessness, can only be held accountable for her behavior if she is a willing party.

Aged *nu ahong* generally have low literacy in Chinese, and many of them cannot read Chinese at all. Thus they tend to abide rigidly by teachings received from their own mentors, unable to make a link between doctrine and its translation into a praxis which reflects changing society. Religious activities were as good as suspended in the period between the late 1950s to the late 1970s causing a subsequent shortage of well-qualified *nu ahong*. The *nusi* restored or rebuilt since the 1980s are now being managed either by elderly *nu ahong* or by Muslim women who have just a smattering of religious learning. The unique

curriculum used in *nusi*, mainly based on Persian texts, has preserved women's mosque education in a state unchanged since its historical beginnings, including sex education. However, this conservative education has limited influence in Muslim communities where women's reproductive health is the concern of government departments and local women's associations.

Ethical Education: Confucianisation or indigenisation of ethical ideas

In the Ming and Qing Period, 'Chinese Muslim scholars conscientiously combined Islamic ethics with Confucian ethics. By searching for commonalties and similarities, they developed an Islamic ethical system imbued with features of Chinese culture' (Ma Mingliang, 1994:90). The intention was to leave Islamic religion intact at the same time as easing its acceptance by the host culture. The greatest degree of Confucianisation can be found in Muslim values and ethics concerning society and family which involved the construction of Muslim female identity.

An admixture of Confucian ethics was a salient part of the foundation on which was built the basic moral identity of Muslim women. The ethical structure of *wudian* (five rites underlying Muslim behavior) bears the strong imprints of the Confucian codes of *sangang wuchang*, *sancong* (the Three Obediences) and *side* (Four Virtues) which are at the heart of Han Chinese moral culture (see Chapter II.2). Only in the order of priority of primary social ties did the Islamic emphasis on the marital relationship in *wudian* reveal itself in a higher ranking than is the case in the Confucian code of *sangang wuchang* where the relationship between sovereign and minister, father and son, preceded that of husband and wife. Muslim women were expected to obey their father and, after marriage, their husband, with a specific stress put on a woman's obedience to her husband. Omitted was the Confucian request for obedience to the son. Liu Zhi describes the ideal femininity as such: 'A woman must conduct herself and win respect from others by observing the five rites: say what her husband says; take what her husband allows her to take; never go out without permission; never see *wainanren* (male strangers); and never do anything against her husband's will' (1988 reprint: 118). However, Liu Zhi disagreed with the idea of men's superiority over women that is a cornerstone of Confucianism. He advocated that males and females should be valued and cultivated equally, thus giving Muslim women (including girl infants) a distinct position: 'Teaching starts with prenatal education' and 'love every child regardless of its sex and intelligence' (1984 reprint: 317).

Liu Zhi also argued that proper moral instruction begins in the womb and not,

as with Confucian pedagogy, after birth and should be considered as the most decisive period of learning, in the early period of pregnancy, the parents-to-be should control their desires and be careful about their behavior. Do and say nothing presumptuous and indecent. Avoid what is obscene and take no unsuitable food. Just follow whatever is good for one's temperament but discard what is harmful. By doing so, you gain peace of mind, thus exerting a good influence upon the unborn baby. This is what we call prenatal education' (1988 reprint: 122). Here the emphasis is on the influence parents exercise over the character of their (unborn) children through their own conduct; this is in contrast to an educational model which involves the direct moulding of children's moral character and the acquisition of skills for practical purposes. Children of both sexes were thus to be raised as good Muslims and valued as of equal worth. Female infanticide and ill-treatment on the basis of sex did not fit into this model and were indeed condemned as inhuman and in violation of Islam.

Moral instruction in women's mosques

Generally, the ethical education conducted by *nu ahong* can be classified into two categories, one is to instruct young brides, the other is to provide general religious and moral education for believers as well as specific training for students of Islam, *hailifan*.

The *nu ahong* in the Beixiajie Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou provided us with a description of the traditional moral education for young Muslim brides in the *zhongyuan* region. Wang *Nu Ahong*, already in her seventies, tells the brides and bridegrooms about the importance of observing *wudian* to ensure proper Muslim conduct in this world; and about the regulation which applies to afterlife. Only those in possession of this knowledge have the requisite qualification to enter an Islamic marriage: the young couples are told that it is violating Islam to kill a Muslim; to take Muslim properties; to suspect a Muslim of a crime unless one has the evidence; to smear any Muslims' reputation; and to take Muslim children as slaves. As for afterlife, those who believe in Allah will not stay in purgatory for long. Wang *Nu Ahong* relates the phenomenon of female infanticide, more ubiquitous before 1950, to an ignorance of these central Islamic precepts and to the value farmers place on male labour, backed up by Confucian ideology. This crime cannot happen where religiosity (*jiaomen*) is still in place. In Muslim communities in *zhongyuan* where there is good *jiaomen*, no one would ever kill a baby girl.

The scriptures form the source for Muslim women's general moral education and for the training of *hailifan*. Women who seek out the mosque for general

instruction will hear about a woman's duty to respect and serve her husband; to show filial obedience to her parents-in-law; to respect the good reputation of a chaste woman; to give alms; to treat one's relatives and neighbors well; to be polite to others as well as nice and kind; to show discretion in one's public speech and speak only to praise Allah or to speak highly of others; never to gossip, tell lies and go against one's own conscience; never to sew discord; to admit to mistakes, be fair and not ill-treat others; never to inflict random violence on animals or human beings; to respect non-believers (non-Muslims); to have no sexual intercourse with men other than husbands; to raise one's children well and guide them in line with Islam; to obey the country's law (*fucong wangfa*) and not betray the country.

Education can be divided into three ethical categories which relate to the family, to self-cultivation of moral character and to social ethics. And again the input from Confucian morality is clearly apparent in the respect for the husband's parents and the total subordination to the husband. However, the sequence of a woman's obligations, starting with her husband, with parents-in-law and responsibility towards children always secondary, shows that family ethics (*jiating daode*) has a strong Islamic component, contrary to Confucian ideas which value parents more strongly while ignoring children altogether.

The criteria for Muslim women's self-cultivation are mainly taken from the *Shengxun* (Hadiths, in the influential translation by Chen Keli, 1994) . The most important concept closely connected to Muslim women's personal moral cultivation is *jie* (cleanliness), resonant of multiple meanings, referring not only to outside or physical cleanliness, but also to the purity of spirit (dedication to Allah in total self-abnegation) as well as one's noble qualities. Muslims often use the word together with *jing* or *qing* (clean, tidy and neat), but place the emphasis on purity. *Jie* is associated with religious faith, assiduous attention to religious duties, to ethical cultivation, and concern over hygiene and health. Ma Fuchu, a late-Qing scholar, wrote: 'when taking part in religious service, one must be pious and clean. With a clean body, clean dress, clean location [of worship], one's heart will also remain clean'. And he continues: 'The body will be clean when one takes a bath, the heart will become pure when there is no desire' (Ma Fuchu, 1923, Vol.2). The translator Chen Keli explains the meaning of *jie* in a note to *Shengxun* as 'external cleanness is something to which everyone pays attention. Body, clothes, residence, all are quite clean. In this way personal hygiene, general sanitation and the common people's hygiene will turn out to be a great blessing. "Inside purity" refers to everyone holding the right faith, with no evil desires and obscene behavior. Everyone follows the rules and lives a meaningful life' (*Shengxun*, 1994:34). Its antonym is *zang*', dirty' or

‘unclean’, which also has multiple connotations. It not only refers to visible physical and environmental squalor, but also refers to anything detested or opposed by Islam, such as pigs, idols, obscene and rude words, and the like. When Muslims talk about something or somebody ‘dirty’, their criticism often has either ethical or religious connotation. For example, a person who tends to gossip or enjoys others’ quarrels is labeled ‘dirty’.

Social ethics (*shehui daode*) is a part of women’s education. As an ethnic minority, living in scattered settlements in a non-Muslim society, it has been of fundamental importance for Muslims to adapt their life-style to cope with pressures from the ruling classes and a larger non-Muslim cultural hegemony. An important part of socialisation of men and women has always been to understand how to obey the rulers, abide by the state laws and co-exist cordially with non-Muslims. *Nusi* education has traditionally incorporated this facet of life under conditions of diaspora by teaching women how to conduct themselves and instruct members of their families how to ensure the Muslim community’s safe survival. This concern for the community at large through women’s education has made women’s mosques take on social functions which transcend the original duties defined for them by the great founding fathers of Islamic education.

Although through the traditional curriculum historically influenced by early intellectual Islamic and Muslim traditions and in many ways dependent on patriarchal Islam for an understanding of the nature of their duties and rights, *nu ahong* often interpret the ethical implications of texts of instruction in highly idiosyncratic ways – due to a low Chinese literacy level, conditions of training (traditionally at women’s mosques whose *ahong* live too often sheltered from social change), and dependency on an outdated pedagogy. Different *nu ahong* generally have different understanding and give their own distinctive explanations on *fudao*, ethics for women. Representative is a *nu ahong* in Zhengzhou who connects conscientious execution of a wife’s duties with admission into paradise, specifying the wife’s obligations as the daily service of carrying the meals to her husband, washing clothes for him, and the like. What is more, she evaluates each wifely deed in terms of *sewabu* (not unlike Buddhist points of merit) so that washing a coat for the husband or serving him a bowl of rice amount to certain number of *sewabu*. In contemporary Muslim society, and more specifically, in Muslim communities in the *zhongyuan* region, however very few women are prepared to be as completely obedient as their mothers’ generation. Young, educated Muslim women, particularly but not exclusively in urban areas, tend to adopt a critical attitude towards what they see as unduly strong patriarchal Confucian accretions in the area of family and women-

directed morality in violation of fundamental Islamic, Koranic values. However, such critical reappraisal of transmitted Muslim tradition is not possible for many of the older and generally illiterate Muslim women. Yet even these women are sufficiently influenced by Maoist ideas of sexual equality to look at conventional Muslim wisdom on ideal womanhood as in need of change in line with society's demands on the labour and talents of women.

The *jingtangyu* (a linguistic medium, evolved over time, and used in mosques to conduct religious education), was formed in late Ming and early Qing China, and continues to transmit the cultural ideas of that period. Most of the aged *nu ahong* use the *jingtangyu* to instruct and to communicate with believers. Whilst the external world has changed greatly, and with it the language as an imprint of this change, the aged *nu ahong* still derive spiritual solace and certainty from a text that has been frozen in time. Not until the late 1980s with the emergence of modern Arabic schools which enroll both male and female students, and with the increase of pilgrims to Mecca, have members of the older generation of *nu ahong* come to realize the widening gulf between their education offered and the world for which believers must prepare themselves.

In their traditional capacity of assisting in the educational work performed by men's mosques, women's mosques have contributed immeasurably to the maintenance of a unique Chinese Muslim ethics. The above discussion has highlighted features of commonality, the outgrowth of conscious and more imperceptible acquisitions from Han culture. But distinctive differences nourished by an abiding adherence to principles of Islam are equally striking: they include schools for women in a Han society which equated ignorance with female virtue. Attention to women's religious and ethical education resulted in the emergence of a class of female religious professionals and scholars with knowledge of Persian and Arabic. Although female infanticide was certainly not unknown among Hui Muslims (in the absence of statistics, the memory of the older generation provides anecdotal insight), where it did occur in a few cases, its religious and social condemnation was harsh. A glance at the demographic statistics provides circumstantial evidence of a relative low level of sexual discrimination among the Hui group. If compared with the figures on the Han population, the female-male sex ratio reads consistently, and increasingly, in favour of women. For instance, in Henan Province, the sex ratio among the Hui population is one of 100:102.64 (with the female as 100), 102.64 in 1964, 100.39 in 1982, and it dropped further to 99.20 in 1990. In contrast, when taking the province as a whole, the sex ratio changes in favour of males from 102.4 in 1964, 104.1 in 1982, to 105.0 in 1990. Similar differences can be observed in other areas also where sex ratio of Hui and Han populations are moving into

opposite directions, with the former consistently displaying a balanced ratio (Liu Yuanchao, 1992, 1994; Yang Zhen, 1993). Interpreted most cautiously, these statistics indicate that there is little evidence for the practice of female infanticide and neglect as a collectively condoned strategy for patrilineal maintenance. Although it might be argued that the greater number of children allowed to minorities (two to three) relieves some of the pressure which rests on one-child Han families, the impact of Islamic doctrine and education cannot be discounted.

Health Care Education

Personal hygiene and a sanitary environment are as much part of religious praxis as of a distinct Muslim culture. Chen Keli, a famous Muslim scholar and translator explains the benefits of ablution prior to daily worship: 'Praying is a significant task, only those cleansed both externally and internally can complete it. The ablution performed prior to the ceremony is a course of preparation to train one to become clean, externally and internally. At the same time, performing ablutions also has developed a good hygienic habit. The *dajing* (comprehensive ablution) and *xiaojing* (partial ablution) specified by Islamic doctrine, cover all aspects, ensuring that every Muslim will live hygienically and in sanitary conditions from the cradle to the tomb. This, of course, will benefit the health of the individual and the whole community' (Chen Keli, 1994:34). Key events in women's lives, and attendant ritual taboos and knowledge of purification, take up much of what constitutes women's religious instruction. Menstruation, pregnancy, child-birth, and sex, are however also matters to be learnt about by all Muslims as they impinge upon the conduct of family affairs as much as communal rites.

Knowledge relating to women's biology, health and relevant ritual provisions can be divided into two areas. Firstly, demands for standards of hygiene and sanitation are basic to Islamic concepts of cleanliness and purity. More specifically, attention must be paid to the body, dress and site of worship. The water used for ablution must be clean; *dajing* and *xiaojing* must be performed whenever appropriate. Both forms of ablution, overall and partial, attach great importance to the cleanness of the genital area, to be washed five times a day. After sex, after menstruation, after childbirth, the *dajing* is mandatory. These severe demands on personal hygiene are seen to have raised the quality of well-being and health among women. Piety is often associated with glowing health and longevity and women even from poorer backgrounds have access to hot water and clean conditions, rare in surrounding Han communities.

Secondly, the health of women becomes a specific concern during menstruation, pregnancy and delivery of a baby and is ensured through ritual taboos in the form of powerful restrictions on a husband's access to sex and a woman's legitimate right to protect herself through refusal (albeit qualified in certain conservative interpretations of a husband's prerogatives, see above discussion). A husband who insists on sex violates a fundamental law of Islam and therefore Muslim women acknowledge the service Islam renders in controlling male sex drives. The Islamic taboo on participation in worship and fasting is also seen as a protective device for women during vulnerable periods of female biological cycle, ensuring their strength to care for family and children as an overriding female priority. The other taboos during these times exempt women from religious duties such as reading the Koran, entering a mosque, and entering on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The *nu ahong* believe that one's health is a gift from Allah and good *jiaomen* (piety) expresses itself in a healthy body and complexion. Indeed, in recent years *nu ahong* have begun to praise the benefits of Muslim praxis in terms of the hygiene and healthy exercise it provides for the believer. The theory of *qigong*, an ancient theory stressing breathing exercises, has been cited to convince lethargic Muslim women of the benefit of taking part in the ritual of worship which includes fixed sequences of kneeling, rising, stretching, bending, and sitting. No statistics are available to substantiate claims by Muslim believers about the linkage between active piety, health, longevity, controlled fertility, and Allah's blessing of women. But in a larger environment of scarce resources, cultural strictures on female self-determination, neglect of women's reproductive health, and patriarchal control over women's bodies, those female *ahong* and believers who claim a superiority of secular and spiritual expectations over non-Muslim women, carry the force of conviction and a glowing complexion to demonstrate the fact that their claim is not without certain living proof.

Chapter VI

‘The Road to Allah’s Commandments’ – Conflict of Loyalty under Chinese State Law

Muslims throughout the world must cultivate a life-style which embodies the doctrine of Islam. The Islamic ideational system demands that its religious doctrines regulate daily conduct by means of which God, or Allah, is worshipped as the sole divinity. The Islamic doctrine is also called the law of *shari‘a*, meaning ‘the road leading to the source of water’. ‘The road to Allah’s Commandments’ can be divided into two parts: one speaks of religious rites and obligations; the other defines the taboos and conduct which relate to Muslim social and legal life. Both are held by Muslims to be a perfect reflection of God’s will and divine creation. Muslims can only hope to please God by adhering to, and obeying, God’s commands.

The conjugal and family laws form an important part of the Islamic Law. While it is not very difficult for Arab Muslims, living in the core region of the Islamic world, to adhere to the law of the *shari‘a*, Muslims in China, far away from the Arab region, are faced with a unique problem: how to evolve a reasonable relationship between on the one hand the Chinese State and its official law, backed up by Han main-stream culture, and on the other hand the Islamic Law which belongs to a so-called minority culture. How to reconcile and resolve contradictions in case of conflict of loyalty? These are very practical issues since the Islamic ideas which concern marriage and family differ widely from those which underlie Chinese main-stream culture.

Great changes have taken place in Chinese women’s life after this century’s women’s liberation movement for sexual equality and freedom of marriage, and through the transformation from traditional Confucian law to the modern law. As part of the Chinese female population, Muslim women have equal experience of the great reforms which turned over their non-Muslim sisters’ lives. However, within a unique culture shaped by the confluence of Islamic law, traditional patriarchal law and the modern family law of 1950 and 1980, Muslim women

have developed life patterns and choices which deserve closer study.

Chinese Muslim women's dual identity has placed them under the often contradictory influence of both state law and Islamic law (Feng Jinyuan, 1995). What is the position of women who live their lives by double criteria? What are the factors which affect their rights and responsibilities in marriage and family? What is the relationship between Islamic Law and Muslim women's lived lives? What do women themselves think about their state in marriage and family? The answers can be found only in an examination of Chinese Muslim women's marital and family life.

Muslim Women's Rights and Position in Marriage and Family: The Situation in the *Zhongyuan* (Central China) Region

Marriage and family are the most significant part of a Muslim woman's life which, in a patriarchal society, form almost the total reality of a woman's existence. Apart from her religion, a woman usually lives only for her husband and family members. Therefore, to understand Chinese Muslim women's rights and position in marriage and family we must acquire a more complete representation of their history and status in society. The focus of our interest is Muslim women's life in *zhongyuan*, from the early Republican period to the present time. Our research concentrated on *nu ahong*, on *shiniang* (wives of *ahong*), and on other Muslim women who keep in close contact with mosque life. Having received Islamic religious education, and therefore capable of a deeper understanding of Islamic doctrines and regulations, *nu ahong*, as the most informed Muslim women, have become the main subject of our studies. They are best capable of crystallising conflicts and adaptations of the Islamic law and the modern secular law. Through the individual experiences of these and further selected women, observations are possible of changes taking place in *zhongyuan* Muslim culture.

Marriage

Zhongyuan Muslims maintain an attitude of total commitment towards marriage. Marriage is regarded as every adult Muslim's obligation to God, and every Muslim parent must help his or her child to get married. This obligation is obviously anchored in Islamic religion which attaches great importance to lawful marriage. With its central purpose to reproduce and maintain moral integrity as well as keep believers from falling sway to immoral temptations, marriage is the axis around which revolves a virtuous and orderly life (Na Guangyong, 1995;

Xie Hongen & Chen, 1992). The Islamic marital law takes marriage as *wazhibu* (self-evident) and as conduct in accordance with God's sacred plan, and disapproves of those who stay single (when able to marry). Under the influence of Islamic law, very few adult Chinese Muslims will choose, or have the choice, to stay single.

According to Islamic law, 9 year old girls and 12 year old boys are considered responsible and grown-up beings (*chuyou*). When a Muslim reaches the age of *chuyou*, the fundamental Muslim duties to God must be observed, and preparations get under way for marriage. Chinese Muslims commonly observe this rule and have developed a tradition of early marriage; the Muslim *Hui* nationality in *zhongyuan* is no exception. In the Republican period, Muslim women in *zhongyuan* got married at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Some poor families gave away their 11 or 12 year old daughter to be a child daughter-in-law (*tongyangxi*) in her future husband's family.

In an agricultural society where the natural economy constrains the kinds of personal choices people make, unmarried children are dependent upon the family and unable to lead an independent and autonomous life. This economic reality as well as the continued influence of the wide-spread (Han) custom of early marriage, have given parents a significant part to play in their children's marriage. In such a marriage system the parties to the marriage are placed in a totally passive position.

In *zhongyuan* before the 1950s, particularly in the countryside, men and women were strictly segregated. Women were generally confined to their houses, so they would not become involved with men. In North Henan, contact with the outside world was mainly the men's duty who were doing most of the work outside, whereas women were staying in the house, looking after home and children. Parents instructed their young daughters who had reached the age of *chuyou* not to step across the threshold. Young widows had to be accompanied by a family member when it was necessary for them to venture out.

These social rules reveal strong Islamic influence. The Qing Dynasty scholar Liu Zhi points out in that 'the most carefully observed regulation in our religion is the rite [which exists to distinguish] between men and women, it is regarded the first of all human virtues'. These 'rites … happen to agree with the traditional idea in Chinese society that man and woman should keep distance from one another' (Liu Zhi, 1988 reprint: 155) – thus entrenching sexual segregation further.

Early marriage and the taboos on social intercourse between men and women increased parents' responsibility for their children's marriage. Like Han women at that time, most Muslim girls ultimately married the men chosen for them by

their parents. In North Henan, the two families of the bridal couple had to exchange the ‘personal papers of the dragon (the would-be bridegroom) and phoenix (the would-be bride)’ through a go-between when an engagement was made. The papers instructed ‘obeying parent’s orders and listening to the go-between’s suggestions, … the son (aged …) of X, has married the daughter (aged …) of Y. The union is made to last a hundred years. Drums and bells are struck to celebrate their love, and their future descendants will be prosperous forever..’., which indicates that ‘parents’ arrangement based on go-between’s suggestions’ was the preferred marriage model in the locality. A good case in point is the marriage of Zhang *Nu Ahong*, now in her seventies. When she was sixteen, she was married to an *ahong’s* son in Jiaozuo County. The marriage was arranged by her parents, and her uncle acted as the go-between. Two other *nu ahong* from Kaifeng, also in their seventies, experienced the same fate. Parents and go-betweens arranged the match, they both were married to a man whom they had never seen before. One of the *nu ahong* vividly described this marriage model as ‘choosing a cat inside a bag by feeling blindly on the outside’.

The ‘choosing-a-cat-inside-the-bag’, or arranged marriage, model was the customary experience for Muslim women prior to the 1950s. Very few women escaped such a fate. They, however, seldom protested at this violation of their Islamic marriage rights. Instead, most women accepted an inescapable tradition steeped in a spirit of obedience, the result of a dual cultural influence from Islamic and Confucian patriarchy. In fact, while the model accepted by Muslim women differed greatly in nature from the marriage model encouraged by the Islamic law, it was similar to the marriage model encouraged by Han-Confucian tradition. The wide-spread violation of an important feature of the Islamic marriage, that marriage should be based on consensus from both the man and woman, after they have been introduced to each other, is a good illustration of how Islamic law yielded to practices customary in the specific environment of *zhongyuan* culture.

Interesting is the form this compromise took. Although marriages were on the whole arranged by parents, the wedding ceremony adhered to the solemn Islamic rites of *nikaha* (betrothal). The *nikaha* ceremony proclaims that a marriage is legal and was entered by both parties voluntarily. The *ahong* who presides over the *nikaha* ceremony as a witness to the marriage poses the mandatory ritual questions to bride and bridegroom. The bride must answer *dadan* (I am willing to marry) and the bridegroom vows *gaibulikailedan* (I will respect the bride’s wish). However, in this context these answers merely affirm the passive position of the couple and must not be interpreted as an expression of autonomy on the part of Muslim women. It attests to the fact that the external form rather than the

inner essence of the Islamic marriage law was the norm in *zhongyuan*.

The situation began to change essentially after the 1950s, and the change was particularly obvious in cities. In the 1950s and 1960s, a woman was allowed to meet her husband-to-be several times after the marriage had been arranged by her parents, and both parties could express their views on each other. Two *nu ahong* who took office in Zhengzhou related their marriage experience in the 1950s and 1960s which already responded to a changed political environment. One *ahong* comes from Kaifeng and the other from Zhengzhou, and both told of similar marriage procedures: after a relative acting the part of a go-between had recommended a suitable candidate, and the parents of the girls had voiced their approval, the couples were allowed several meetings before the marriage. Also, since the 1980s, great changes had taken place in the identity of the go-between. In the past, a go-between was customarily one of the relatives, but nowadays, a go-between can be a relative, a teacher, a classmate, or someone else. What is more, today's go-between acts only as a bridge, which will enable the young men and women to get to know each other. A marriage takes place only when the man and woman have fallen in love with each other after some time of contact. Parents no longer have the absolute say in their children's marriage; however, they still can make suggestions. A great majority of Muslim women now marry the men of their choice. For instance, Li *Shiniang* in Zhengzhou was introduced to her husband (an *ahong* in a men's mosque) by her (also his) teacher, a male *ahong*, when they were both studying scriptures in a mosque in Shandong. After some time, they found that they shared the same goals and had similar interests, and in due course decided to get married. In 1992, Dongjiao Mosque in Xian held a collective wedding ceremony for three young couples. All three couples had experiences similar to that of Li *Shiniang'*s.

Tao *Ahong* in Xian was first introduced to her husband by a relative, while Gao *Ahong* in Zhengzhou got to know her husband through a classmate. They both passed through the three steps of introduction, falling in love, and consummation of a union based on shared values and interests.

Regardless of who the go-between may be, an *ahong*, a relative or a classmate, all Muslim women we met had fallen in love before getting married. Women are thus granted a high degree of autonomy in the choice of a husband, and what they value most is the shared feelings expressed in the symbolic significance of the Islamic betrothal gift, a promise of love, rather than of materialistic value. The considered opinion of many Muslim youths now is that this marriage model is best and most Islamic.

The new marriage procedure reflects the Islamic requirement that agreement from both the man and woman involved in a conjugal contract is an essential

element of a marriage. The change from ‘arranged marriage’ to ‘free’ resulted from these factors: firstly, from the 1950s to the 1970s, a great number of urban women participated in social work and expanded opportunities for social intercourse. The new marital law (1950) was implemented and undermined the legitimacy of unconditional patriarchal control in both Islamic and Confucian guise. Secondly, since the 1980s, while the Chinese marriage law continues to exert decisive impact on Muslim women’s marriage, Islamic law is regaining its influence on Muslim women’s marital rights. A good case in point is the marriage experience of young female *hailifan* in the 1980s and 1990s, which allows the conclusion that the prevalent marriage model in *zhongyuan* is not only the result of changes internal to Islam, but also of social changes in the realm of women’s rights, and of ideological privileging of love and conjugal compatibility over the tradition of familial prerogatives.

The intermarriage of Hui and Han is a very sensitive problem. In the Republican Period before the 1950s, intermarriage of the two nationalities was rare, and it was almost unheard of for a Muslim woman to marry a Han husband, because the power of spouse choice was with the parents. However, such cases occurred more often since the 1950s, when men and women began to enjoy greater freedom in marriage and increased opportunities for socialising. In general, however, marriage between Hui and Han (*waihun*), particularly between a Muslim woman and a Han nationality man, encounters strong opposition by the great majority of Muslims. Many Muslims are worried that such a mixed marriage might make Muslim women forget their religious belief. Even where a Han nationality man is willing to convert to Islam, the relatives of the Muslim woman continue to create a great fuss, and she and her family easily become the target of criticism in the local Muslim community, sometimes the pressure is so unbearable that plans for the marriage are cancelled (for example, see Chapter XII, Shui Zhiying’s account). Some women with a strong streak of independence in their character do marry a Han partner, despite opposition. But whereas their marriage is protected by law, they may sacrifice ties with their natal family and their community of relatives and friends.

A Wife’s Position in the Family

Family is the natural and most fundamental unit of social life, with the basic relationship that between husband and wife. Islam centers marriage as the building block of God’s blueprint for this world. The Koran instructs Muslims that when two Muslims become husband and wife, they should love and have compassion for each other as is Allah’s wish and pursue their respective duties

as husband and wife. The husband is charged with the responsibility of supporting his wife and children, while the wife is entrusted with the duty to serve her husband and take care of the children. The husband has authority and control over the family. These regulations indicate that Islamic law emphasizes stability and harmony anchored in a traditional division of labor which places the wife as subordinate to her husband, and makes obedience and submissiveness the peculiar virtues of Muslim women.

Islamic law defines the relationship between husband and wife in a way which overlaps with Chinese tradition. The primary division of labor in a family in the *zhongyuan* region before the 1950s could be summarized as 'man working outside, woman doing housework at home'. Generally speaking, a husband's earning was the only source of income for the family. In some Muslim families, the wife would help her husband run the family business. Poor Muslim peddlers could be seen selling goods near Hofuminli Mosque and Yuyuanli Mosque in Zhengzhou, assisted by their wives. In this economic class, wives enjoyed a relatively equal position in the family.

But whatever the wife might be called upon to do, pursuing her duty as a housewife or as a partner in business, the husband always held a dominant position in the family economy, because he was responsible for the family's upkeep. His wife was considered assisting her husband in his sacred duty to safeguard the family's welfare. For Muslim women, a wife's sacred task was to obey and defend her husband. This task was laid out in the five texts of the *nurenjing* (scriptures for women), which all the *nu ahong* are required to learn, and thus *fudao*, female morality (see Chapter V), has continued to function as the gendered standard of conduct for all female *ahong* and common Muslim women.

The Islamic law grants a husband a spectrum of rights. Based on the principle that 'a husband is his wife's mentor', Islam attaches great importance to the husband's obligations and responsibilities and requires that a wife should be treated kindly. In Muslim communities in *zhongyuan*, the division of labor was so strongly defined that Muslim wives would calmly accept the role allocated to them by indigenous culture and by Islamic orthopraxy that most of them would simply take it for granted that they should stay home and leave their husbands to take care of public affairs.

However, a small number of Muslim women who by some ill luck were either discarded by their husbands or for other reasons were unable to rely on their husbands' support, and threatened with calamity. In Zhengzhou, in 1940, a Muslim woman's husband acquired a mistress when he moved to the city, and he subsequently refused to care for his wife any longer. Having lost her source of

support, the deserted woman broke down and lost her reason. Although the irresponsible husband could be reprimanded and shamed by *ahong* and mosque community, none of the punishments enforceable in Islamic countries could be lawfully applied. As the husband had moved out of the original Muslim community to which he once belonged, the *ahong* could do very little to help the wife. In the social environment of that time, the perfect Islamic family model, and thus the fate of a dependent wife, was closely linked to her husband's conscientious conduct. Without such personal qualities, a Muslim woman's life would be ever vulnerable.

The Islamic laws provide for women's property rights to make up for individuals' deficiency. These property rights mainly involve the right to a betrothal gift and to a share of inheritance of a father's property to which the husband has no rightful access. Women are free to dispose of their properties as they wish. They can sell, rent out, donate or employ someone to act on their behalf to manage a given property.

But in *zhongyuan* where most Muslims were poor, women were unable to utilise such a safety net. Commonly, many Muslim women only received some items of clothing and several personal ornaments as betrothal gifts. Obviously, these could not grant sufficient security in times of familial crisis. As for the Islamic inheritance right, it was even less relevant. The property inheritance system which operated in Chinese society for several thousands of years stipulated that only sons could inherit. Women were excluded. Under the influence of the traditional Chinese inheritance system, Muslim women in *zhongyuan* were never granted the right to inherit property from their parents or relatives. In the patriarchal Muslim families, the size of betrothal gifts and non-observance of women's inheritance right could easily trap Muslim women in extreme economic difficulties once their husbands refused to support them. Therefore, as members of both Chinese patriarchal society and patriarchal Muslim families, women's destinies were closely bound up with the quality of husband and marriage; their lives were never in their own hands.

Since the 1950s, the greatest change for Chinese women involved stepping out of the family to take part in social production. Particularly in the cities, the great majority of young women joined the labour-force and earned an income of their own. In Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, many of the Muslim women became wage-earners after the 1950s.

To have a job means that female labourers have been relieved from private labour in a family unit and have become part of socialized production, which is of great social significance to the Muslim women. Firstly, it has enabled women to feel economically independent from their husbands; secondly, it has

undermined the husband's dominant position in the family; thirdly, it has shifted the traditional division of labour in the patriarchal family.

In Kaifeng and Zhengzhou Muslim families, where both husband and wife are salary makers, their combined incomes are the major financial source of the family. They discuss family affairs and make decisions on the financial budget or any of the important events in the family together. The old picture of a powerless wife in the family no longer exists, having been replaced by a new model, in which the couple have equal rights to make decisions on family management, budget and consumption.

Although many husbands, and some women, still think that doing housework is a wife's duty, and women continue to do most of it, the old division of labour, in which 'men engage in affairs of society and women oversee domestic affairs,' however no longer has validity with modern working couples. Some men are willing to help with the housework when their wives are working, some take care of their children and their home when their wives are absent. It is taken for granted that couples must share the burden of housework.

In fact, the process of the female laborers' socialization is the very process by which women gain independence, weakening therefore the patriarchal division of labour based on sex. This is also the process by which the nature of family relations moves towards greater equality between husband and wife.

Yet, despite these changes, the influence of Islamic law is still felt today. Its impact is especially strong on female *ahong* who have received higher religious education. This traditional canon law continues to remind Muslim women of their obligations as wives, and admonishes them to obey their husbands; the channels of transmission of these ethical norms are family and mosque.

In Zhengzhou, a *nu ahong* in her sixties had to ask her husband's *kouhuan* (permission) before taking office. Although to be a *nu ahong* had been her long cherished wish and aspiration, she would not have taken office had she failed to get her husband's *kouhuan*. In her mind, it is more important to obey her husband and keep a harmonious family than follow her own inclination.

Our focus of research interest also included Muslim women married to an *ahong* who have followed their husbands to reside in a mosque as *shiniang*. These women are young Muslims who have often received a modern education and acquired a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic law. On the whole, their duties are limited to housework; they look after the husbands' needs and raise their children in strict observation of Islam. Li *Shiniang*, the wife of a young *ahong* in Zhengzhou, has been immersed in this Islamic model of ideal married life happily and contented. Considerations of equality do not enter her mind because she enjoys her husband's respect and love. This family life is most clearly

modelled on the ideal which the Prophet defined for all Muslims, a life in which men and women have their distinct place and corresponding duty to fulfill.

Yet another pattern of family life, represented by the female *ahong's* family life, is also often considered worthy of emulation. Since the 1980s, the mosques have trained a large number of young female *hailifan* who have learned both Chinese and religious knowledge in Islamic schools. Some of the *hailifan* have married *ahong* and become *shiniang* upon graduation, while others have taken up positions as *nu ahong* in charge of all the religious affairs in a *nusi*. Most *nu ahong* live in the *nusi* for reasons of convenience. As no tradition has developed for a female *ahong* to live with her husband in a women's mosque, where to reside has become a practical problem for married female *ahong*. Commonly, only the children can live with her in the *nusi*. It is up to the *nu ahong* to decide how to arrange the accommodation for her family as women's mosques have not issued explicit guidelines. For example, a 32 year old *nu ahong* in Zhengzhou lives alone in the *nusi*. Her husband is a *hailifan* in another place, and she has left her child in the care of her mother-in-law. Sometimes, her husband will come to visit her with the child, or she will go to see them when she has time. A 27 year old *nu ahong* in Xian pursues her duties in a *nusi* while her husband teaches in an Islamic school sponsored by another mosque. Assisted by this mosque, they have been able to move into a simple, small room right beside the mosque. However, their child stayed back in Huhehot, and months go by before they can pay a visit. Shouldering great religious responsibilities, a female *ahong* cannot devote much of her time and energy to familial duties. The contradiction between vocation and family has troubled these *nu ahong*, who are utterly familiar with moral dicta, and the tension leads to strong guilt. Tao *Ahong* told us that she owes her children much; they enabled her to work for *jiaomen* (religious culture). Only support from husbands and families create the conditions which allow *nu ahong* to devote themselves whole-heartedly to their work.

In modern Chinese society, Muslim women, like other women, live in diverse social arrangements. Whatever the individual circumstances, sexual equality, underpinned by family law, finds approval among most Muslim women, as it does with most Chinese women, and is furthermore taken to constitute an Islamic concept. However, this does not mean gender equality is realised alike or invested with the same meaning. Under the dual influence of religion and state law, Muslim women's actual familial and social position reveal how individual women organise their lives to match society's expectations, adhere to religious precepts, meet their families' needs, and fulfil their private yearnings for contentment in a way which identifies them as both Muslim and Chinese.

Divorce

Muslim marriages in *zhongyuan* before the 1950s were highly stable and divorce cases rarely heard of. In the rare cases where divorces occurred, they were generally settled according to Islamic law and in the traditional Chinese way.

From the women's point of view, the traditional divorce was harmful to them. A divorce was generally proposed by the man and called *xiuqi* (to divorce the wife). Though Muslims thought of divorce as undesirable and would not divorce lightly, once the words were uttered, the customary divorce proceedings were set in motion. The wife was placed immediately in a state of *daihunqi*, that is, the period of waiting for the divorce. When the husband said *xiuqi* for the third time, and the wife's *daihunqi* had come to an end, the couple finally separated and divorced. Women themselves had very limited divorce rights. A majority of Muslim women considered that they were altogether without such rights; according to them, a wife might repeat a hundred times that she would have a divorce, but the divorce would never happen. Moreover, women were placed in a very unfavorable situation when it came to distribution of property and to custody rights over their children, and divorced women received hardly anything from their former husbands.

The Koran has granted Muslim women certain rights concerning divorce. Warning women that they should not get a divorce without sound reason, it also defines the situations in which a woman may apply for a divorce (Ma Yuxiang, 1989; Wang Huaide, 1991). Grounds such as a husband's physical defect, or sexual impotence, or religious aberration, or maltreatment of his wife, could justify divorce proceedings. In the Republican Period, secular laws became more progressive when the government also granted women the right to divorce and own property (The Chinese Republic Civil Law began to take effect on 5 May 1931).

These laws stood in sharp contrast to the situation in traditional Chinese society. Under traditional criteria, a man could divorce his wife for the following reasons: failure to show filial obedience to parents-in-law, failure to bear a male child, licentiousness, jealousy, a foul disease, lack of social discretion, and thievery. But a woman had no right to get a divorce and the wife enjoyed no property right in the family. She was allowed to use and keep the property on behalf of her family, but not to possess it.

In the Republican Period, the actual life of Muslim women in *zhongyuan* conformed to Chinese traditions on issues concerning divorce and property. But why were Muslim women unable to enjoy their rights to divorce and to inherit property when all these were defined clearly in both the Koran and in secular

law?

An understanding of Muslim women's status relates necessarily to the history of Islam in China and its gradual process of indigenisation after introduction in the seventh century. A typical case in point was the movement of translation of the Islamic canons into Chinese and of 'explaining the scriptures couched in Confucian terminology' which began in late Ming and early Qing (see Chapter II.2, III). In *zhongyuan*, a region permeated with traditional Confucian ideas, tradition imperceptibly fused with Islamic ideas and became a unique life-style of *zhongyuan* Muslim, shaping marriage and family life. It is not difficult to imagine how in the process of Islamic indigenisation in China, the rights of women to property and divorce were curtailed, how the protective provisions defined by religious law and state law for the promotion of women's interest weakened when confronted with traditional Confucian strictures on gender relations.

It is therefore not surprising to hear from informants that where divorce cases occurred in Muslim communities, they were settled in the traditional mode of *xiuqi*; that is, no case is known in Zhengzhou, Kaifeng or in North Henan, where a woman had asked to divorce her husband.

When a divorced woman had to return to her parents' home, apart from economic pressures, she would also face intense social pressure resulting from societal negative attitudes towards divorce. In traditional thinking, a discarded woman must spend the rest of her life in disgrace. Few means of making a living and the loss of face a divorce entailed for a woman trapped divorced women in situations of extreme difficulties. This accounts for the great reluctance of some Muslim women to get a divorce no matter how hopeless their marriage. They would rather endure, or commit suicide, than face the disaster of *xiuq*i. Women could only seriously call for their rights when economic independence had replaced economic powerlessness.

Since the 1950s, particularly after the 1990s, many women, especially urban women, have left their homes and participated in work, achieving economic independence. This independence, and the implementation of the two marriage laws, have changed Muslim women's ideas on the issue of divorce. The two marriage laws of 1950 and 1980 have shown clearly that the government has been trying to protect the freedom of divorce. Both laws define in detail the process and settlement of a divorce, and the legal evidence that should be offered in asking for a divorce. The new marriage law published in 1980 has defined love as the criterion for a marriage. A couple is allowed to divorce if they do not love each other. This law, which also applies to Muslim women, has created a better legal environment for a fair implementation of the right to divorce.

Women's participation in work and labor has brought them independence both economically and spiritually, and increased their relative power in marriage and family, which has also helped conjugal relations to develop in the direction of love. The idea of valuing love in marriage grows along with the idea of free divorce, both have helped Muslim women in Chinese society no longer to be afraid of divorce, but to begin to give attention to the quality of their marriage.

In Zhengzhou, divorce cases involving Muslims are on the rise indicating a change of attitude towards divorce (Henan Bianji Weiyuanhui, 1994:278–279). An urban Muslim woman in her forties would consider turning to the law for help if her marriage were in trouble. She would ask the court to help solve the practical problems, such as division of property, and right of custody if she has children. Resorting to the court or the civil administrative authorities has become quite common when confronted with the problem of instituting divorce proceedings.

Features of the patriarchal religious law unfavorable to women, for instance, limits on the woman's right to divorce, the husband's prerogative to press *daihunqi* on his wife, are ignored by practically all Muslim women who are about to get a divorce. Only *ahong* and *hailifan* are still familiar with the tradition of Islamic divorce. A female *ahong* in Wuzhi County used the term *kanshou wangfa* (obey the official law), a term pregnant with the history of Muslim accommodation, to describe the overriding principle of abiding by the state law. No conflict therefore arises between the divine religious law and the official Chinese law; any different approach would be a matter of private, individual action. Ultimately, a final divorce requires the official chop of approval.

The influence of religious law has decreased markedly in *zhongyuan*, especially in the cities. But its influence has not disappeared completely and can still be felt to a certain degree in some areas. Nowadays, most people have accepted the fact that divorce is on the rise. But quite a number of Muslims will still classify divorce as *maikeluhai* (abhorrent to Islam) behaviour, as something of which God disapproves, but which is supported particularly by elderly women. If a Muslim woman decides to get a divorce when she finds that her husband has another woman, she is likely to meet resistance from all quarters. Everyone, including her husband's family, her own natal family, and her own children, will ask her to continue the marriage, even if by legal criteria it is already dead in all but name. This depicts a true picture of a common Muslim woman's life in Zhengzhou in 1990s.

The recent case of a Zhengzhou woman, however, illustrates the matter of private, individual action in divorce. In her sixties, her children grown up, this

woman confronted an unexpected crisis when her husband pronounced the divorce to marry another woman. She sought out the *nu ahong* for advice, who told her that, according to Islamic law, her husband had already divorced her. As a wife's agreement was not needed, all that remained was to accept the fait accompli. However, the woman went to court and declared that she would not agree, using her right under the secular state law to reject a unilaterally pronounced divorce.

The elderly Zhengzhou woman, in refusing her husband's divorce, responded to a different kind of imperative which led her to ignore even her children's advise to divorce their father. Her refusal was neither economically motivated (she was a retired worker and had a monthly pension, and her children were all working and treating her well), nor did she hope to get back her husband's love; she was worried about her rightful place in her husband's family graveyard. She was not interested in her rights as a wife while alive, but in her right to be buried in her husband's family graveyard as his wife. In this conflict between modern views on women's rights and traditional Confucian ideas on the dire fate of uncared-for souls in afterlife, the latter won out, reflecting the lasting influence of Confucianism on particularly older Muslim women's inner world.

Remarriage

Two kinds of Muslim women faced the issue of remarriage: divorced women and widows. The traditional idea of chastity in Chinese patriarchal society demanded of a woman to 'live with the same man all her life' and never to 'marry another man'. The idea of chastity in traditional Islamic patriarchal society differed somewhat; although it also emphasized that a woman should be true to her husband, it did not require a woman to keep her chastity after a divorce or death of her husband. The religious law encourages divorced women and widows to remarry so that they may find a way to eke out a living.

In the Republican Period, Muslim women in *zhongyuan* were subject to both traditional Chinese patriarchal ideas and Islamic patriarchal ideas. Marriage was their only source of security and livelihood. When a woman's life was changed because of a divorce or due to her husband's death, how was she to arrange the rest of her life?

Divorced women, generally speaking, had the following alternatives: firstly, remarriage. A divorced woman might get help from her parents' family to set up again a family of her own. In North Henan society, views on divorce were generally negative. A second marriage would thus take place far away from both her parents' family and from her ex-husband's family. What is more, she would

choose to depart for her new home at night. In this stealthy conduct she did not differ greatly from contemporary divorced Han women.

Secondly, she could stay single. After experiencing deeply-felt disappointment, some women would refuse to marry again, instead choosing to study scriptures in a *nusi*. In Kaifeng, the divorced women who were studying scriptures in *nusi* were dependent on their parents' families for support. Since Muslims were commonly poor at that time, the support of a female *hailifan* constituted a heavy burden for these families. Therefore, only after consulting her parents and other family members, could a woman decide on this path. If she chose against the family's will not to remarry, she would have a very difficult time later on.

Many young women became widows during war times. These widows did not suffer the serious discriminations inflicted on divorced women, but their life was just as precarious. To lose one's husband in a patriarchal society placed the woman's survival in danger. Remarriage or widowhood, both offered difficult options: some widows struggled in hardship to bring up their young children with the help of their parents or parents-in-laws; childless women were known to enter a mosque to study the scriptures.

Whether in past or present society, remarriage for a Muslim woman can rarely be said to reflect her own wishes. Whatever her choice might be, she would have endured visible or invisible, internal or external, pressures. A widow in Zhengzhou told of her experience. Her husband died when their two children were very young. Her parents felt sorry for her and asked a go-between to find her another spouse. But her parents-in-law and other family members disapproved of her remarriage. They abducted her from the wedding ceremony which was to commence her second marriage. Afterwards, she stayed in her parents-in-law's family as a widow and devoted herself to bring up her children.

Listening to another woman's story, now a *nu ahong* in Zhengzhou in her seventies, she became a widow when she was eighteen. Her parents forced her to remarry, threatening to let her starve, whereas she would have chosen to study scriptures. Conflicts of these kinds usually ended in the widow's submission. To persist entailed personal courage and the willingness to suffer. Those with the opportunity to study scriptures in *nusi* might find a place to live and receive consolation and possibly a way of making a living.

It is worth reiterating that non-Islamic traditional Chinese ideas about chastity had greater influence on Muslim women in *zhongyuan* than Islamic laws which encouraged divorced and widowed women to marry again. In North Henan, Zhengzhou, and Kaifeng, traditional Chinese ideas about chastity were one of the major factors which had prevented numerous widows from marrying again.

Some of the childless widows whose husband died soon after their marriage and *weihun guafu*, 'bride widows' whose husbands died before the wedding, kept their chastity for their deceased husbands believing that 'one woman must not marry two men'. Commonly, they adopted a child from a relative to support them in their old age. The lives of Chinese Muslim widows and divorced women in great part fell outside the realm of Islamic influence which with its concern for the wellbeing of women, regardless of their station in life, could have intervened for their benefit.

When the revolutionary Marriage Law was published in 1950, the freedom of remarriage was enshrined in law for men and women. The actual implementation of this right is in the individual's hand. On this point, the Islamic law agrees with the state law and will not arouse conflicting feelings in Muslims' minds. However, it is clear in modern society that Muslim women's freedom of choice to remarry is not just a legal but a social problem.

For instance, the children left from the first marriage may be perceived as belonging properly only to the late husband's family. In a Hui nationality village in Qixian County, a woman's husband died when she was in her thirties. She gave the *kouhuan* to her dying husband that she would not marry again and would bring up the children herself. Many widowed Muslim mothers like her sacrifice their own happiness. Also, a *nu ahong* in Zhengzhou lost her husband when in her thirties. By then, the youngest of her four children was only four months old. She chose not to marry again for the sake of the children and shouldered alone the heavy burden of supporting a big family. The prerequisite for the choice not to remarry is the economic capacity to survive without husbands, which has been made possible by a society which transformed housewives into wage-earning labourers. We have talked to a number of contented old widows in Houfuminli Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou. They all agreed that to marry again at an old age was a disgrace, and they thought it 'inconvenient' and too restrictive to be tied to another husband.

Social Progress and Chinese Muslim Women's Position in Marriage and Family

As far as modern Chinese Muslims are concerned, Islamic Law, a meticulously-wrought system defining extensive obligations based on religious ethics, cannot constitute the sole normative source of social conduct. In China's vast land and long history, the Islamic laws have collided, fused and been assimilated with traditional Chinese cultural norms and post-Confucian secular changes and re-emerging traditions. Furthermore shaped by legislative and political

transformations, a unique culture of rights and obligations evolved to influence Chinese Muslim women's experience of marriage and family.

But to assume that Islamic ethical norms have no influence on Chinese Muslims or on Chinese Muslim women's rights in the area of marriage and family would be incorrect. 'Islam is not just a religion, it is also a way of life'. Perhaps we can maintain that these Muslim women are passing through a transitional period when the patriarchal and hierarchical marriage and family model is changing into a direction of greater sexual equality which also affects interpretations of Islam. Thus Chinese Muslims develop new explanations of the suitability of regulations on marriage and family relations for modern women and men, seeking to render religious law more responsive and in keeping with the spirit of sexual equality encoded in Chinese modern marriage law.

Chapter VII

From Dependence to Independence: Women's Mosques, Islamic Patriarchy and the State

Most *nusi* (women's mosques) are located in the courtyards of *nansi* (men's mosques) and are often seen as subordinate to *nansi*. Their revenue and expenditure are usually under the control of the *nansi*; and the main religious celebrations are also organised by the *nansi*. However, mosques established by women and by donations from women are independent. A number of initially dependent *nusi* have developed and gradually separated from the administration of the men's mosque. These self-administered *nusi* have challenged many traditional ideas, and exercised a profound and lasting positive impact on women's position in the religious world. The economy of *nusi* has grown quickly since China began to reform and open to the outside world in the 1980s. The growth has laid a necessary material foundation for the development of women's religious culture.

Zhengzhou, Henan's capital city, has seen unusual advancements in the growth of *nusi* (see Chapters II, III, IV). Only after the 1980s did *nusi* begin to flourish in Xian, Shaanxi. Huhehot, Inner Mongolia, began to encourage *nuxue* (Koranic schools for women), after the 1980s, which have had an impact on Northwest Muslim communities, extending their influence increasingly all over the country. In Zhoukou, women's mosques go back over 100 years and show very unique characteristics. In 1996, we visited Xian, Huhehot and Zhoukou, and also investigated eleven *nusi* in Zhengzhou City that year. The intent of this chapter is to provide a general description of the different models of administration in the economy of women's mosques, and of their impact on Muslim women interviewed who are closely involved with mosque life.

Subordinate or Independent: Different Models in the Economic Management of *Nusi*

Generally a *nusi* is small in size, and it is common to see a *nansi* one to three times larger in the same Muslim community. A *nusi* has fewer functions than a men's mosque. Nowadays, a *nusi* commonly retains the characteristic functions of a *nuxue*, some preferring to put *qingzhen nuxue* (Koranic Women's School) on the sign over their gate. Whereas *nusi* confine themselves to providing a place of worship and Islamic education for women, *nansi* hold funerals and religious wedding ceremonies; and also slaughter animals in accordance with Islamic stipulations. Celebration of religious festivals and preaching of sermons are all within the competence of the men's mosques, with some taking responsibility for setting up schools, kindergartens and libraries. Since the subordinate women's mosques are limited in their functions, the management of their revenue and expenditure is usually simple.

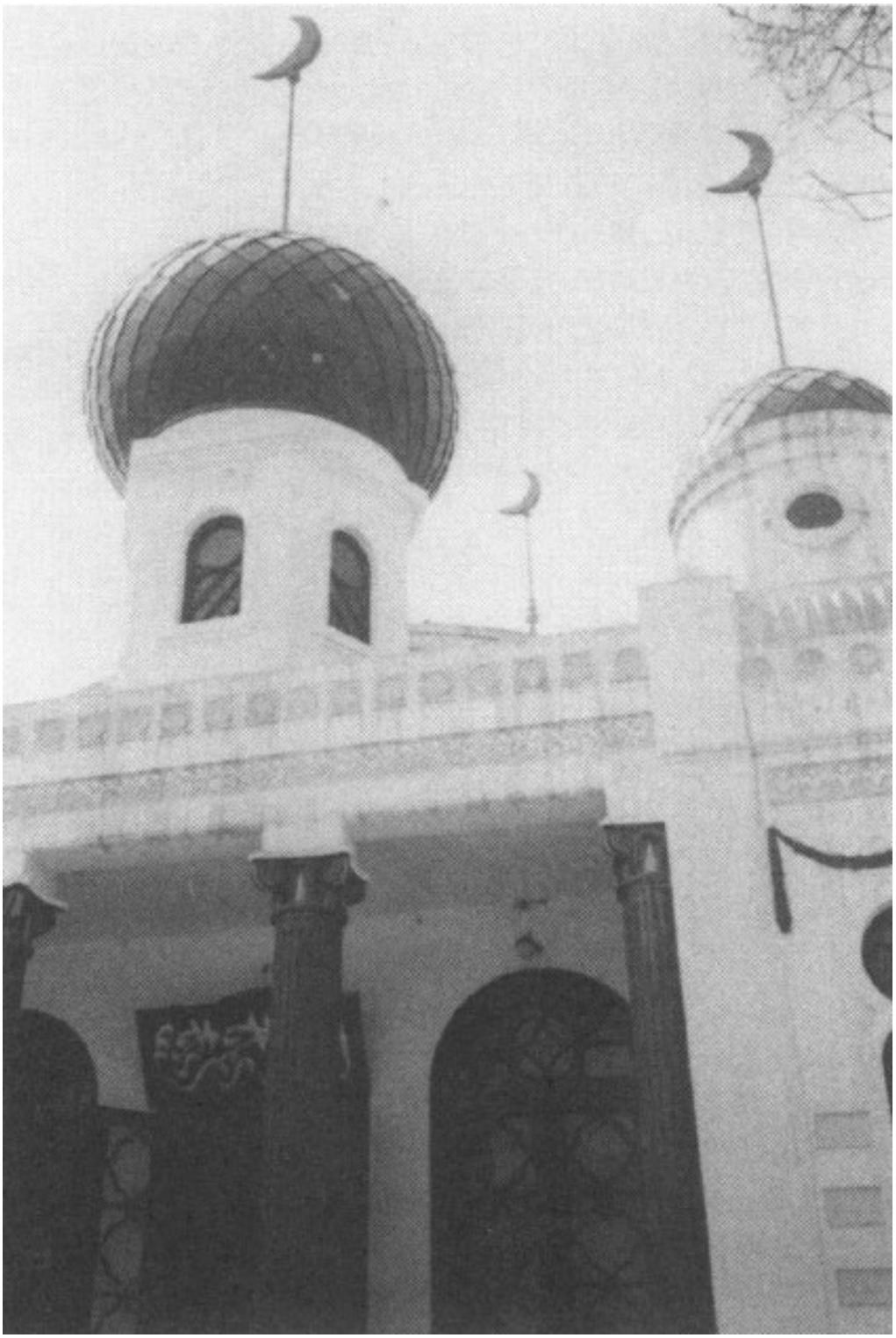


PLATE 5: (Men's) Eastern Mosque, Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. 25 April 1997 (Jaschok)

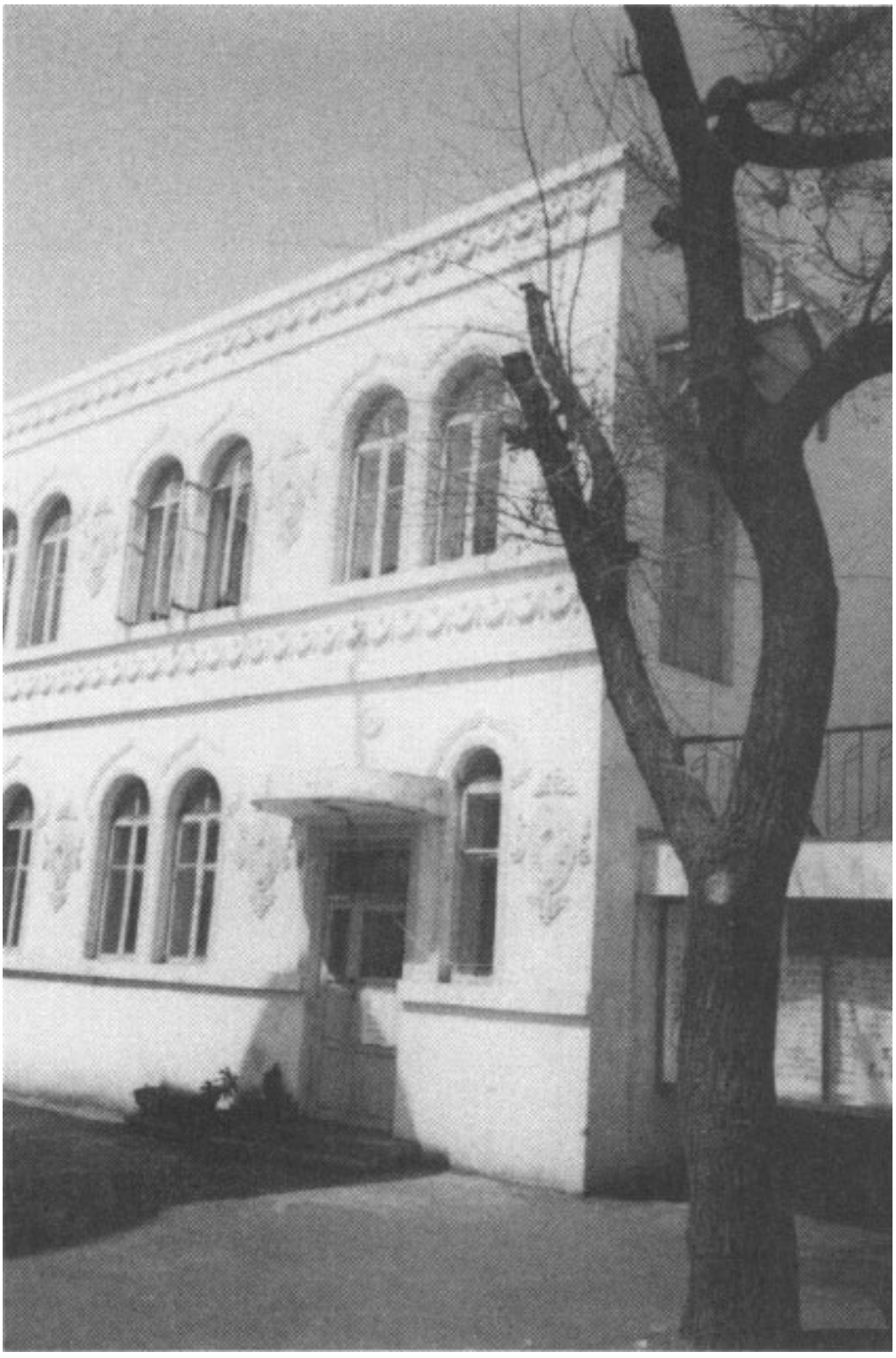


PLATE 6: Women's prayer hall (upper floor) and ablution room (ground floor) in the compound of Eastern Mosque, Harbin. 17 April 1997 (Jaschok)

The economic management of women's mosques can be represented by two

kinds of models, based on their relationship with men's mosques as subordinate or independent. In 1996, eleven women's mosques were located in Zhengzhou City: four were economically independent and managed by the women themselves, six were under the centralised management of men's mosques. The remaining one, although run by women, was about to collapse. Xian City has sixteen women's mosques, but only one is independent. Of six women's mosques in Huhehot, one is self-governed; three mosques consist of rooms partitioned with a curtain and situated inside the prayer hall of a men's mosque. Also, only one of the six women's mosques in Zhoukou is functioning separate from the men's mosque.

In Subordination: The Economy of Women's Mosques Managed by Men

A subordinate women's mosque is often seen as part of a men's mosque. Certain *nusi* are set up in a men's mosque simply by turning some of the spare rooms into space for women to pray (*nu libaidian*) or perform their ablutions; some are set up in a side-wing of a men's mosque when the need arises, and still others have been purpose-built side by side with a men's mosque when many mosques were restored in the 1980s and 1990s. In these cases, revenue and expenditure are not kept separately. Government departments concerned (see below) have never registered these women's mosques as independent locations for religious activities. Usually, there is only one administrative committee for both the men's and women's mosque, some of which have female *shetou* (administrators) to participate in the management of the men's mosques as deputies or members. *Nu ahong* in Zhoukou are generally members of an administrative committee. However, some administrative committees have no women, and their economic management can be further divided into two groups; those with *nu ahong* and those without.

Women's Mosques with *Nu Ahong*

In our investigation, twelve subordinate women's mosques were discovered which had invited their spiritual heads. These include Houfuminli *Nusi*, Niuzhai *Nusi* and Duizhou *Nusi* in Zhengzhou; Daxuexixiang *Nusi*, Xiaoxuexixiang Yingli *Nusi*, and Jianguoxiang *Nusi* (in Henan *Fang*) in Xian; the subordinate *nusi* attached to Da Mosque, Bei Mosque and Dong (Eastern) Mosque in Huhehot, and the subordinate *nusi* attached to Chenzhou Mosque, Huaiqing Mosque and Donglao Mosque in Zhoukou. Although Houfuminli *Nusi* in Zhengzhou is registered, it is not regarded as an independent women's mosque because its economic management is overseen by a men's mosque.

Whether to invite a *nu ahong* and whom to invite is decided by the *shetou* of the men's mosque. Sometimes, opinions of female *shetou* in the women's mosque will also be taken into consideration. Both male and female *ahong* sign contracts which usually last three years, but may vary as long as five years or as short as one year. The duration of the contract is decided in discussions between the *shetou* of the men's mosque and the *ahong* to be invited. Once a decision is made, the leadership of the men's mosque will sign a formal letter of appointment and send members of the women's committee to deliver the official invitation to the new *ahong*.

The welcome or departure of an *ahong* is an important ceremonial event. When a *nu ahong* is appointed, an invitation will be sent to most of the mosques in the neighbouring *fang* (parishes) and even beyond. A banquet (called *daike*, treating the guests) is arranged for invited guests, and each guest will bring a present as an acknowledgement of this occasion. People in Zhengzhou like to present an inscribed board or embroidered banner to express their congratulations. Sometimes, the *shetou* of the men's mosque will give a letter of appointment to the *nu ahong* in the presence of the guests, so as to show respect for her. The ceremonies to welcome or see off an *ahong* are expensive. Generally, the financial situation in the men's mosque will decide the size of the banquet.

When an *ahong*'s term of office is over and the contract is discontinued, the *daike* ceremony will be held again. People concerned will gather, giving accounts of the *ahong*'s accomplishments made during her years of work. The *song ahong* (seeing the *ahong* off) is not as ceremonious as the reception of an *ahong*. If the contract is renewed, a new letter of appointment will be given to the *ahong*. Guests will also be invited to the occasion, only the ceremony is held on a smaller scale. Mosques in Zhoukou have developed a system of their own: most of the male or female *ahong* invited to serve are from the locality, and nowadays *nu ahong* in office are over sixty in age.

Women's mosques provide a *nu ahong* with two connecting furnished rooms, a bedroom as an inside room and an outer sitting room, along with a kitchen and some kitchen wares. But an exception was seen in Jianguoxiang *Nusi*, Xian, where the *nu ahong*, already in her eighties, was living in the *nu libaidian* (prayer room), with her bed and bookshelf standing against the east wall. Fortunately, this situation is only temporary as a new women's mosque is under construction in a site not far from the men's mosque.

In addition to teaching women general religious and ritual knowledge, *nu ahong* working in Zhengzhou, Zhoukou and in the Henan Muslim district of Xian, will also wash *maiti* (the corpse) of a dead woman. Muslim women invite

female *ahong* to *kaijing* (chant scriptures) on various occasions such as when a family member is going on a trip, and upon her return. Muslims who belong to the *laopai* or *gedimu* (traditional) school invite a female *ahong* to *kaijing* on the seventh day and the last day of the first month (called *duiyue*). An *ahong* is present also on the 100th day, the anniversary of the first year and of the third year of one's mother's death in order to ask forgiveness and blessings from Allah. In contrast, *nu ahong* at the local *fang* (parish) in Xian or in Huhehot will neither wash *maiti* nor *kaijing*.

Mosques built in Xian are divided into the local *fang* or Henan *Fang*. Those built in the Henan *Fang* were the labour of Hui refugees who came there from Henan during Anti-Japanese resistance, most of them were from Kaifeng or Hebei (Hui people from Henan use this term to refer to the counties on the north bank of the Yellow River). The first two women's mosques in Xian were built by Muslims from Kaifeng and Sangpo (in Mengxian County, Henan) in the 1940s. The first female *ahong* was also from Henan. *Nusi* in the local *fang* of Xian were built after the 1980s when men's mosques were repaired or rebuilt. However, *nu ahong* were not invited to work in a local congregation until after the 1990s.

A *nu ahong* is placed in a subordinate position in the governance of religious affairs in her own *fang*, and will not preside over wedding ceremonies or funerals. She will neither chant *nikaha* (marriage vows), nor lead at *zhenaze* (the funeral ceremony) nor *kaijing* (chant scriptures) at the graveyard, for all these are considered the duties of a male *ahong*. Besides, male *ahong* must also preside over religious festivals and train *hailifan* (students of the Koran). Although it is quite common for *nu ahong* to engage in the religious training of *ahong*, it is by no means universal (due to lack of demand or to a woman *ahong*'s deficient knowledge). Because female *ahong* are charged with fewer responsibilities, they are paid less than male *ahong*.

Nu ahong will be paid by the men's mosque on a monthly basis. As for the *nietie* (a financial donation) female *ahong* receive when washing *maiti* or *kaijing*, different mosques apply different rules. In some mosques, all alms and donations go to the institution, some may demand only a percentage, while others permit the *nu ahong* to keep all. The nature of the distribution is linked to the *ahong*'s salary, and the rules are generally decided upon by the male *shetou* and the new woman *ahong*. Monthly salary ranges from 150 to 400 *yuan renminbi*. Most get salaries in the 200 to 300 *yuan* range.

Women's Mosques without *Nu Ahong*

In our investigations we learned that four *nusi* in Zhengzhou have no *nu ahong*,

twelve *nusi* in Xian, two in Huhehot, and two in Zhoukou. In these women's mosques, only *nulibaidian* and *nu shuifang* (women's ablution-room) are available. No boarding is provided for *nu ahong*, and religious activities are mostly organised by men's mosques.

The subordinate *nusi* attached to Luzheng Mosque in Zhengzhou is also called Yuyuanli *Nusi*. In the 1930s, it was located opposite the men's mosque and had a resident *nu ahong*. When repaired in the 1940s, it was moved to the back of the men's mosque. Finally, when the men's mosque was rebuilt in 1991, the two were built side by side in the same yard. The *Nusi* provides an ablution room, changing room and *libaidian* for women. A dozen of Muslims come to take part in the service, about seven or eight regularly attend weekly classes in religious knowledge given by the young *hailifan* from the men's mosque. Li Cuixia, *shiniang* in the women's mosque, is 30 years old and has received religious education for over three years. Living in the mosque with her husband, her main task is to take care of her husband and their two children. She also teaches male *hailifan* how to chant the Koran for several hours a week, but never instructs women in ritual knowledge. Women rarely come to ask for her advice. If some women's mosques invite the *shiniang* to take part in religious activities, the men's mosque will make the arrangement for her. Generally, the *shiniang* will go in the company of the *ahong* and *shetou* of the men's mosque, accompanied by two or three elderly women.

Niezhuang *Nusi* in Zhengzhou started its construction in July 1993, simultaneously with the reconstruction of the men's mosque. Both were completed in January 1996, and share the same courtyard and gate. The newly built *Nusi* has a prayer hall with an area of over 20 square meters, and ablution rooms of over 10 square meters. More than a dozen women come to the service, and the number increases to over twenty during Ramadan, the month of fasting. The hot water is provided by a work-unit next door, and the Village Committee pays for the water and electricity. Most of the regular worshippers are retired women. Before the women's mosque was built, only three or four women joined worship in the men's mosque. To take showers, they had to wait until the men were finished and then use their *shuifang*. A *shuifang* for women was built in 1988, and one *libaidian* were added in 1991. Women had to ask for instruction from the Beidajie *Nusi*, also a learned Muslim woman was invited to teach them proper religious observances. But all that has changed with their newly built *Nusi* as the women now have their own prayer hall for worship, and facilities for their other activities.

Wuyingli Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou is situated next door to Huayuanjie Men's Mosque. Originally, the two-storey brick and wood building was a men's

mosque built by Kaifeng natives in the 1930s. It was damaged when Japanese planes bombed Zhengzhou, and later was turned to other usage. In 1979, a few elderly women living nearby managed to get the dilapidated building and began to organise worship. They had to boil water on four small stoves and use a small water tank to perform *dajing*, the large ablution. The charges for water, coal and electricity were mainly paid with *nietie* from the women. Now, most women worship in Huayuanjie Women's Mosque, and only a couple of women remain whose dream it is to build another new *nusi*.

Huayuanjie Mosque was built by people from Xingyang, close to Zhengzhou, in 1921. Nobody knows when the old Women's Mosque was built. But people remember that it was located in an independent courtyard, and its prayer hall was built with brick and of traditional Chinese design (an apparently three-room house which conceals five rooms). Now the old prayer hall has been turned into a storage site which is part of the Men's Mosque. The old private quarters of the *nu ahong* and the classrooms have both been turned to other use. When religious activities in the Men's Mosque were resumed in 1987, part of the men's ablution-room was turned over to the women and a corner of the Mosque's prayer hall was partitioned with curtains for women to perform their prayers unseen. By then, many elderly ladies who used to worship in Wuyingli Women's Mosque also came here. When the Men's Mosque was reconstructed in 1995, a part of the newly built men's *shuifang* was again partitioned to accommodate women's need. Now a dozen women come to take part in worship.

Ten mosques in Xian are situated in a rectangular area, enclosed by Xida Street, Beida Street and the City Wall: the Da Huajuexiang Mosque, Bei Guangjijie Mosque, Daxuexixiang Mosque, Yingli Mosque in Xiaoxuexixiang, Zhong Mosque in Xiaoxuexixiang, the Xi Mosque at Sajin Bridge, the Gu Mosque at Sajin Bridge, Dapiyuan Mosque, the Beida Mosque in Xiaopiyuan, and Hongbujie Mosque. Most Xian Muslims reside in this district. All the ten mosques are frequented by local Xian Muslims. Located in south Dongdajie Street, Nanguan Mosque is also regarded as a local *fang*, and is the only mosque in Xian without a subordinate *nusi*.

All *nusi* in the local *fang* in Xian were built after the 1980s except for the Bei Guangjijie *Nusi*, which was built by people from Sangpo, Henan, in the 1940s. The Bei Guangjijie *Nusi*, a two-storey building, was rebuilt in 1994 when the men's mosque was repaired. In general, all women's mosques are connected to men's mosques, with the exception of Dapiyuan Women's Mosque and Shitouxiang Women's Mosque (the property of the Da Huajuexiang Mosque). The two are located several 100 meters away from the Men's Mosque. Loudspeakers in the women's prayer hall connect it to the Men's Mosque and

enable the women to join in the worship when the male *ahong* is leading the service or preaching *woerci* in the Men's Mosque. Of course, they can also pray individually.

All the men's mosques in the local *fang* of Xian have started classes in religious knowledge for women except the Da Huajuexiang Mosque. Classes are scheduled flexibly to give women more alternatives, for choosing to go to class during mornings, afternoons or evenings. If someone misses a Monday evening class, repeat lessons are held throughout the week. The number of students in a class varies from twenty to fifty. *Hailifan* from the men's mosque often come to teach. In the Women's Mosque at Yingli Mosque in Xiaoxuexixiang, the 27 year old female *ahong*, Tao Surong, also teaches a training class. Male and female students from the local Islamic school (which has seventeen female students) at Dapiyuan Mosque often come to teach in the training class.

Unlike Zhengzhou and Zhoukou, young women in Xian show great fervour in the study of religious knowledge. We attended a class studying a chapter from the Koran which was organised by the Islamic School at Dapiyuan Mosque. Fifty women came to the class, of which two-third were 20 to 40 years old. Before 8:30 pm, a grade-three male student reviewed the previous lesson with the women, then a female student in the same grade began to teach the new lesson. She had a very beautiful voice, and when she was chanting, everyone listened attentively. It was a moving experience.

The case of Dapiyuan Women's Mosque is unique in that its finance was once managed independently. Although the Men's Mosque is now acting on its behalf, its financial account is kept separately. Some elderly women campaigned hard to get back their mosque property in the 1980s when a more liberal religious policy was implemented. They demanded that the Men's Mosque should give them a small piece of land. They raised funds and *nietie*, and built a small two-storey building on the land in 1986. The washing facilities on the first floor is open to the public and its income is used to run the Mosque. The *Nusi* on the second floor contains a *libaidian* of over twenty square meters, a *shuifang* of about 10 square meters with seven *ivusilou* (ablution facilities), a boiler room and a small guest room.

The new *Nusi* ran well under women's own management. When the old *nu shetou* (female administrator) died, the adjacent men's mosque took over management of the washing facilities because the illiterate women were unwilling to run it themselves. The men's mosque also helps the women to keep their budget balanced and puts its account on the bulletin board once a month. Recently, the women invited Su Yan *Shiniang*, a 25 year old woman from Xining, to be their consultant and lead the worship. Su *Shiniang* is the grand-

daughter of the male *ahong* who resides at the men's mosque. She has two little children and her husband is a student of the Koran at the Dapiyuan Mosque (he graduated in 1996). Living in the Dapiyuan Mosque, she comes to the *nusi* only at prayer time. Su *Shiniang* is not charged with the task of systematically teaching ritual and religious knowledge; she only responds to individual queries. For this service she receives 250 *yuan renminbi* per month.

A property of the Da Huajuexiang Mosque, Shitouxiang *Nusi* is located in a small courtyard. The *Nusi* contains a room for worship, a changing room (both are small, about a dozen square meters each) and a *shuifang*, about three square meters in size, and has only a simple *wusilou* (ablution facility) in order to perform *jingxia* (washing of genital area). A dozen women come here regularly to prepare for worship. They boil water in an ordinary water pot over a stove fuelled by coal, and use the traditional hanging pail and water-kettle for both the *dajing* (large ablution) and *xiaojing* (small ablution). The daily expenses of the *Nusi* are paid by women who come to worship.

The Henan *Fang* in Xian is located in a rectangular piece of land surrounded by Dongda Street, Beida Street and the City Walls. Four women's mosques are located in this *fang*, namely the Xi Mosque in Dongxin Street, the Women's Mosque in Jiefang Road, Jianguoxiang Mosque and Dongcheng Mosque. In addition, Beiguan Mosque, not far from the north City Wall, the Dongjiao Mosque in the Northeast corner of the Guojiatan Textile City, and the newly-built New Northwest Mosque are considered as belonging to the Henan *Fang*. The Dongjiao Mosque is also called Guojiatan Mosque or the Textile City Mosque. Most Hui people in the community are factory workers, technicians and white-collar workers on whose labour Textile City has depended. Its *shetou* stems from Xian, while the *ahong* is a Henan native. The Xin Xibei Mosque is built near the railway line as most active Muslims are railway workers. The Henan *Fang* in Xian cultivates lively relations with the various mosques in Henan Province, not surprisingly therefore most *ahong* in the *Fang* were born in Henan. Only a loose connection exists between the local Xian *Fang* and the Henan *Fang*.

All *nusi* in the Henan *Fang* are situated as part of the men's mosques, with the exception of the Jiefanglu *Nusi*, which is the only independent women's mosque registered (see below) in the local administration in Xian. Women's mosques in Henan *Fang* are relatively small in size. The *libaidian* and *shuifang* are between 20 to 30, and 10 to 20 square meters respectively, in size. On ordinary days, a dozen women worship, but the number will increase to twenty, sometimes fifty worshippers on *zhuma*, the prayer day. The *Nusi* attached to the Dongjiao Mosque is more like a *nuxue* (women's school). Besides three or five local

women, only female students who come to study Arabic from all over the country take part in worship. The women's mosque attached to the Xin Xibei Mosque is only used by a dozen of female worshippers on *zhuma*.

The Revenue and Expenditure of Women's Mosques

Nietie is part of the major income of a *nusi*. An alms collection box is put in every *nusi*, some are placed in the *shuifang*, some in the *ahong'*s reception room. The box is locked, with only a slot for cash donations. Some have three locks so that the box can be opened only in the presence of three persons. Generally, the *nietie* box is opened once a month, at a fixed time, in the presence of at least three people. The *shetou* of both the men's and women's mosques will attend the occasion. After being counted, the money might be kept by the mosque or might be sent to the accountant of the men's mosque. As the revenue and expenditure of a *nusi* are not kept separately, it can benefit from the income of the men's mosque. The men's mosques will give a public account of the budget once a month. The *nietie* is counted and its amount published separately on the mosque's noticeboard.

The major expenditures of a women's mosque are dispensed for coal, water, electricity, and organisation of religious events, for gifts presented to other mosques and to visitors, and for the *nu ahong's* salary. These expenses are managed by the men's mosque as part of their overall expenditure. The *shuifang* of a women's mosque is usually next door to the boiler-room in the men's mosque, thus the hot water, the coal or the heat needed in winter, are all provided by the men's mosque. Now that water is commonly piped to mosques, even a dozen of *wusilou* can be found in a women's *shuifang*, fitted with shower faucets. In addition, there are a few basins for women to perform more limited ablution. In some *nu shuifang*, a long, narrow pool in the centre with two rows of faucets on each side allow women to take *xiaojing*. Some *shuifang* provide both faucets and the traditional water-kettles (*tangping*). Most prayer halls are small in size, generally no more than 20 to 30 square meters. Some may be as small as twelve square meters, while others may reach the size of 40 or even 60 square meters. Electric fans in summer, stoves or central heating in winter start to be commonplace in most prayer halls.

Independence: Women Managing Their Own Mosques

In those cities where we investigated, seven economically independent *nusi* were registered with the local administration. Of these, four are located in Zhengzhou, one in Xian, Huhehot and Zhoukou respectively. They are: Beidajie *Nusi*,

Beixiajie *Nusi*, Minzhulu *Nusi* and Xishilipu *Nusi* in Zhengzhou; Jiefanglu *Nusi* in Xian; the Qian Xinchengdao *Nusi* (also called Huhehot *Nusi*) in Huhehot, and Hexi *Nusi* in Zhoukou.

In 1993 and 1995, the Chinese government registered or re-registered all sites which belong to the five major religions in China (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism). For temple, church or mosque to be a legal place of religious activity it has to comply with the following criteria: (1) it must be a fixed site and have a name; (2) be supported by a group or congregation of religious participants; (3) have an administrative structure composed of religious citizens; (4) have certified religious teachers or clerical leaders who abide by the religious regulations and preside responsibly over religious activities; (5) have fully developed administrative rules and regulations; and (6) rely on regular, legal sources of income (Information Office of the State Council, White Paper, 1997).

All those *nusi* which meet these requirements may register as official sites of worship. As independent and lawful loci of religious activities, they obtain an equal social position with the men's mosques in their *fang*. Female *ahong* and *shetou* have the right to attend conferences or meetings sponsored by the government departments related, and the leadership of these departments will visit the women's mosques to pay their respect and convey their support on the occasion of religious festivals.

Each of these seven women's mosques has its own courtyard and gate. Facilities include *libaidian*, *shuifang*, and the *nu ahong's* private quarters. Some also have classrooms and students' dormitories, while others ensure a constant income by renting out rooms for commercial use. With the exception of Huhehot and Zhoukou, all other *nusi* are located adjacent to a men's mosque. Water is piped through directly to their own boiler-rooms (however, Jiefanglu *Nusi* in Xian is an exception). *Nu ahong*, *nu shetou* and *nu xianglao* in these *nusi* have all worked diligently to improve the quality of service provided for the believers.

The Working Life of *Nu Ahong*

An independent *nusi* always employs a *nu ahong* (also called *jiaozhang*) to preside over the religious affairs, and is the most respected person in a *nusi*. Six of the seven *nu ahong* in office have studied scriptures since early childhood; the majority are in their sixties (but it is possible to meet *ahong* already in their seventies or even in their eighties). The only exception is Li Tianlan *Ahong* in Xian, who started studying the scriptures under the learned Du Shuzhen *Ahong* at Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou when in her forties. She celebrated the *chuanyi*

(graduation) ceremony in 1992, and is now in her fifties.

All seven *ahong* have received comprehensive religious education, and their responsibility is great. A *nu ahong* will not face the congregation during worship, but will lead the women as she stands in the middle of the front row, with her back to them. A *nu ahong's* major task is to impart ritual and religious knowledge. Zhao Yulan *Ahong*, from the Xishilipu *Nusi* in Zhengzhou, described the *ahong's* duty as having 'to explain God's law, and spread the religion in the wake of the Prophet'. Kou Xiuzhi *Ahong* (locally known as Kou *Shiniang*) from Huhehot *Nusi* started a training class in her own house, in 1974. A regular school for elderly women was started in 1984, and over forty women were admitted. Subsequently, about 20 to 30 students enrolled for a course lasting over two years. The school gives classes twice a week, each class lasts two hours. Attending a class, we witnessed how a dozen of elderly women were learning to chant the Koran. In April 1995, Kou *Shiniang* initiated yet another evening class for middle-aged working women.

Nu ahong describe their work as responding to Muslim women's real needs as they listen, give advise on Muslim life-style, provide individual instruction, or impart religious knowledge to the group of women. They tell stories from the treasure of religious tradition, and explain the significance of Ramadan or other religious festivals with appropriate illustrations and parables. Most of the worshippers attending prayers in *nusi* are illiterate old ladies who find it difficult to learn. The *nu ahong* is their indispensable guide to the complexities of Islamic doctrine and Muslim praxis.

Additional duties arise from training female *ahong* and those with aspiration for deeper knowledge. Guo Qinghui *Ahong* at the Minzhulu *Nusi* in Zhengzhou has been training three young *hailifan*, whose lodgings are provided by the mosque. Wang Fengrui *Ahong* at Beixiajie *Nusi* also has been training two young *hailifan* who are sponsored by the mosque. Du *Ahong* at Beidajie *Nusi* has already trained eight *hailifan*, all becoming *ahong*.

A *nu ahong* does not preside over religious ceremonies. When a religious festival is approaching, the *nu shetou* will invite a male *ahong* to chant the scriptures on behalf of the *nusi*. However, *nu ahong* are often invited to attend important banquets as respected guests. The host family will offer a *nietie* to the *ahong*, requesting her to pray for Allah's blessings for the family.

A *nu ahong* often shares the gifts she has received with all the others, or she may *chusan* (offer) money or other things to help those trapped in difficulties. When a mosque is being built, the *nu ahong* will usually give *nietie* to express her good wishes. Conversely, the *xianglao* (believers) are happy if they can do something for their *ahong*. A *nusi* is like a big family, with the *nu ahong* as the

kind, maternal head. If a conflict arises among the believers, the *nu ahong* will ask them to become reconciled. A variety of problems are brought to her, quarrels with a daughter-in-law, unfilial children, prospects of a mixed marriage, and lack of suitable Muslim spouse for an adolescent child. One *mi ahong*, who frequently plays the go-between for Muslim couples, believes that entrance into paradise is greatly eased by such meaningful social networking.

Improved economic conditions have enlarged the social nexus of women's mosques. Reception of a growing number of visitors has become part of a *nu ahong's* daily life. Sometimes they will attend meetings or conferences organised by government departments. As members of the local People's Political Consultative Conference, *nu ahong* now play a political role which they use to further the interests of their congregation and the larger Muslim community. In recent years, more opportunities for international exchanges have brought religious guests from Iran, Japan, the United States, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to the Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou.

Since the 1990s, women have gone in ever larger numbers on pilgrimages to Mecca. A *nu ahong's* pilgrimage is considered a great event in a women's mosque. Grand ceremonies are held both before and after the pilgrimage. Du *Ahong* from Zhengzhou has made two pilgrimage trips while others, such as Kou *Ahong*, Zhang *Ahong* (Wang Fengrui) and Li *Ahong*, have completed one journey each.

At an independent women's mosque, the Democratic Administrative Committee takes responsibility to identify, interview and invite a new *ahong*. Although contracts show the usual term of office, three to five years, the contract is often continued when one term is over. Also, *nu ahong* at an independent *nusi* are comparatively better paid as their salaries are paid directly by the women's mosque. A salary is still higher if she donates to the mosque all the income from washing the dead and presiding over religious rites. Discussions between the *shetou* and the *nu ahong* will decide the salary to be paid before an invitation is sent to the *nu ahong*. Du *Nu Ahong* at Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou earns the highest income, 600 *yuan* a month. She gives all the *nietie* to the mosque and her salary is all her income. Li *Ahong* at Jiefanglu *Nusi* in Xian has nothing but her salary. When a *nu ahong* is invited or her contract continued, the *nu shetou* prepare a large banquet. The financial situation of a women's mosque will decide how lavish the banquet will be.

Independent women's mosques may choose to look after a *nu ahong* even after retirement, particularly if she is of noble character and enjoys a good reputation.

Nu ahong tend to reside in the women's mosques (Kou *Shiniang* in Huhehot is

an exception) and therefore develop close relationships with women around them. They are usually well provided for: a bedroom, a comfortable reception room, some furniture, crockery and basic utensils are commonplace.

Nu Shetou and the Democratic Administrative Committee

Every independent *nusi* has a Democratic Administrative Committee or Mosque Administrative Committee which decides on important matters. It is composed of the chairperson, and of three to five members. Some will have one or two deputies. Official guidelines state that Muslims themselves may elect the chairperson and the committee members. When the term of office expires, another vote is taken, and those re-elected may continue in their office. The government then acknowledges the elected chair and ordinary members, and frequently consults them about religious affairs. Elected Committee members have equal social position with their counterparts in men's mosques. They are often invited to attend conferences and take part in activities organised by the government. When the *nusi* confronts difficulties in relation to the larger society, or in relations with the men's mosque, they will go to the government departments concerned for help and advise.

The chair and members of the Committee are addressed as *shetou*. Their main responsibilities include mosque maintenance, choosing the *ahong* and providing for her daily necessities, repairing or enlarging the mosque property, purchasing or renewing utilities, keeping account of revenue and expenditure, making arrangements for exchanges with other mosques, organising religious celebrations, and deciding the schedule for Ramadan.

All *shetou* work for the mosque as volunteers. A *shetou* is ideally someone who is known for her competency and whose family is affluent. She selflessly contributes her money and skills to the survival and development of the women's mosque. Independent mosques provide both *nu ahong* and *nu shetou* with great opportunities to pursue their aspirations and bring their talents into full play.

The Revenue and Expenditure of Independent Women's Mosques

An independent *nusi* appoints two members of the Administrative Committee to act as accountant and cashier. The monthly balance will be put on the bulletin board for everyone to see. A regular financial system has been established in all the independent women's mosques, except the Xishilipu *Nusi* in Zhengzhou. Before it was registered as an independent *nusi* in July 1995, the water and electricity charges of the Xishilipu *Nusi* were paid for by the men's mosque. Now the *Nusi* pays for electricity consumption, but the water charges are paid by

the men's mosque, and both mosques still share the same water and electricity meters. As the *Nusi* is located in a small *fang*, it has little *nietie* (about 200 to 300 *yuan* a month). The *nietie* box will be opened in the presence of at least three people when money is needed to pay bills. The rest of the money is kept in a bank account, but no documentation exists. Such relaxed management style was quite usual among women's mosques before a regular financial system was established to qualify the *nusi* for registration.

The major income of women's mosques tend to be *nietie*, supplemented by insignificant donations from *maiziqian* (donation for charitable purpose given at the end of Ramadan). Some *nusi* also earn an income by chanting the scriptures on special religious or family occasions, or from interest on their savings. Located in the busy commercial centre in Zhengzhou, Minzhulu *Nusi* has rented out four front rooms for commercial use. Beidajie *Nusi* also has spare rooms and groundfloor premises for rent. Beixiajie *Nusi* and Jiefanglu *Nusi* in Xian both let rooms. When unable to pay the *ahong* from its small income, Xishilipu *Nusi* persuaded the Village Committee to pay the *ahong* and provide the mosque with coal.

Regular expenses of a women's mosque include salary, charges for coal, water and electricity, and for other necessities. Every independent *nusi* will also invite a *sishifu* (house-keeper) to live in the mosque, whose job is to operate the boiler, clean the mosque, accompany or cook for the *ahong*. The mosque will pay her generally 100 to 300 *yuan* per month. Where mosques provide lodging for their *hailifan*, each *hailifan* may be offered 60 to 80 *yuan* monthly allowance.

Since Huhehot *Nusi* started a training school for young women in 1986 (see Chapter XI), its budgetary needs and management have increased considerably. Kang Mingqing, the eldest daughter of Kou *Ahong*, is in charge of the school. Students study for three years before they can graduate. The school enrols fifteen female graduates at junior high school level (about 16 years of age) from all over the country every three years, and provides them with boarding and lodging. All attend worship five times a day. They have classes in the morning and afternoon, but study individually in the evening. Their main courses include modern Arabic, study of the Koran, the Hadiths, Islamic doctrines, Chinese history and Arabic civilisation. The School's graduate level in Arabic equals the level of a graduate majoring in Arabic at a professional language college. Three classes have graduated already, and now the fourth group can be observed studying hard. Tao Surong, the *ahong* at the Yinglisi *Nusi* in Xiaoxuexi*xiang*, Xian, was one of the first graduates from the School. The *Nusi* also provides each student with a monthly allowance of 60 *yuan* and each teacher with a small salary; not surprisingly, the school budget is sizeable.

Nusi, because initially small in size, tend to spend large sums of money on enlargement and reconstruction. Many started in few rooms, built with unburned brick. *Nu ahong* and *nu shetou* always attach great importance to the construction of their mosque. Raising money is often painfully slow, and they must be content to enlarge the mosque step by step, patiently improving its condition and standing in the community. Particularly since the 1980s, the reconstruction of *nusi* has gathered speed, marking certain economic and political progress in the conditions of religious life.

Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou is a good case in point. The mosque was first built in 1912. When it was rebuilt in 1921, it had 18 rooms. In 1984, another 7 rooms of 116 square meters were built. A prayer hall of 184 square meters was built and an area of 114 square meters were added to the Northwest and Southwest buildings in 1987. In 1994, the two-storey building facing the south with an area of 534 square meter was reconstructed. A new arch-door way and another 386 square meters of space were added to the northern wing. Also, the main gate was repaired, and flower-beds and a cobble-stoned path beautified the inner courtyard. After this major construction, the *Nusi* looks impressive, restful and comfortable. An area of 1,334 square meters now provides 66 rooms, including the *dadian* (prayer hall), classrooms, *shuifang, nu ahong's* private rooms, the Administrative Committee's office, kitchen, and others.

In 1995, the Mosque spent 255,000 *yuan* on construction. Of all the women's mosques we have investigated, Beidajie *Nusi* is the largest and most beautiful. The number of worshippers is steadily increasing; two or three dozens of women come to worship on ordinary days. On *zhuma* (prayer day) over 100 believers crowd ablution rooms and the prayer hall.

Though smaller in size, the other independent women's mosques have experienced similar energetic reconstruction and refurbishing: the visitor to a mosque may admire a new boiler, new heating system, modern furniture, kitchen wares, refrigerators, ice-case, electric fans, and other improvements. Acquisition of prayer rugs and mattresses, curtains, big pots and basins, bowls, chopsticks, dishes and plates make it easier to welcome guests and host large congregations on special occasions and religious holidays. Social networking is done at increasingly high costs. On 12 January 1996, Beidajie *Nusi* spent over 10,000 *yuan* entertaining guests at the grand ceremony celebrating the completion of this superbly constructed mosque. On the other hand, however, guests gave over 40,000 *yuan nietie* (donations) in return. Another important expenditure is the amount of money spent on supporting the poorer Muslims in its *fang*. Charity is a major duty of the believing Muslim, and poor women come often to the *nu ahong* for alms, for food or for clothing.

The financial condition of a women's mosque is intimately connected to the standard of living in its *fang*. Beidajie *Nusi*, situated in Zhengzhou's leading *fang* of about 30,000 Muslims, is the most affluent women's mosque we have surveyed. The balanced budget of Beidajie *Nusi* in the 1995 fiscal year provides an insight into the revenues and expenditures of a prosperous, well-administered women's mosque.

The Balanced Budget of Beidajie *Nusi* in the 1995 fiscal year (in *yuan*):

Savings carried over:	Bank Savings	5,493.38
	Cash	134,735.36
	Total	140,228.74
Income in 1995:		208,131.07
	Bank Savings	13,309.78
	Nietie	149,653.00
	Saint's Memorial Day	16,523.70
	Maiziquan	4,450.00
	Nianbailati	1,470.00
	Rents	2,300.00
	Income from interest	2,424.59
	Others	18,000.00
Expenditure for 1995:		335,396.45
	Cash withdrawn	18,000.00
	Construction	255,266.00
	Repairs	16,203.30
	Coal	10,662.00
	Water and electricity	5,182.30
	Wages	10,820.00
	Investment on a Textile factory	7,000.00
	Others	12,262.85
Annual Savings:	Bank savings	803.16
	Cash	12,160.20
	Total	12,963.36

As an independent *nusi* no longer depends for economic survival on the men's mosque, it has become necessary to develop sources of steady income besides the *nietie* from pious believers. Now some women's mosques have begun to rent out their extra space for commercial use, and some are planning new business ventures.

For example, Beidajie *Nusi* invested 7,000 *yuan* on setting up a Muslim Garments Factory in the latter half of 1995 and purchased second-hand industrial sewing machines to produce white caps and head-dresses for Muslims. Ma Jingyun, a provincial model worker, and also a representative of the Henan Provincial People's Congress, was invited by the *Nusi* to head the preparation and management of the factory immediately after she retired from her own work. The factory employed seven Muslim women who were temporarily laid off and experienced economic difficulties. Plans now are to start several other business ventures in Muslim goods and garments.

With strengthened economical capabilities, independent *nusi* provide Muslim women with more services. Beidajie *Nusi* is considering starting a modern Arabic language school for female middle school graduates along the lines of Huhehot *Nusi*. The classrooms and dormitory are ready, but other preparations are still under way. Minzhulu *Nusi* has made similar plans. Other women's mosques intend to set up Hui nationality kindergartens or nursing homes for the elderly.

From Dependence to Independence: Main Factors Facilitating Independence of a Women's Mosque

The major factor contributing to a growing movement towards independence of women's mosques is the expectation in the larger Chinese society that sexual equality is a fact of modern life, but other factors also play an important part in gaining independence.

The Question of Who built the Women's Mosque

Who built the *nusi* is a decisive factor in determining its relative position. Of the seven independent women's mosques investigated, three were sponsored or built by the women themselves. Men's mosques assisted the other three *nusi* with rooms and basic financial help at the initial stage, but all reconstructions were accomplished by women. Minzhulu *Nusi* is an exception to these, as detailed below.

Of the women's mosques investigated, Hexi *Nusi* in Zhoukou is the oldest. At present, a resident *shiniang* in her eighties presides over its religious affairs. Zhao *Shiniang* is in good health and enjoys studying as she still can see and hear clearly. Based on her account of the construction of the *nusi*, the Hexi *Nusi* was probably built around 1860; according to her, women had charge of it from the very beginning. One woman is reported to have donated all her money to build a

mosque for women, to show her gratitude to Allah for the prosperity she had enjoyed. The Mosque maintains the classical Chinese-style courtyard. Every day twenty female students study Arabic in the school attached to the Hexi Men's Mosque and then file back to the Hexi *Nusi* for prayer.

Xishilipu *Nusi* was built in 1944 under the supervision of four old ladies. Without money themselves, these women raised the necessary *nietie* to start construction. Beixiajie Men's Mosque presented the *Nusi* with five *mu* of land to help cover its expenses. The land was taken back by the government, and in compensation, seven shop premises were handed over to both the men's and women's mosques, and the two mosques shared the earnings. When registered as an independent women's mosque in 1995, the *Nusi* could no longer benefit from the rental earnings. Instead, the Village Administrative Committee began to provide the *Nusi* with coal and enough money to cover staff wages.

Huhehot *Nusi* was first built in 1946 by a few women with the money they had personally collected. The mosque covered an area of 1.5 *mu*, and had a large room for prayer. The Mosque has been economically independent throughout its existence with women constantly engaged in efforts to raise funds for enlarging the Mosque. Over 200 square meters is no longer large enough to meet current needs and plans for enlargement are progressing rapidly.

Minzhulu *Nusi* in Zhengzhou was built in 1951 in the Yimin Courtyard, Erqi District and was originally called Yimindayuan Qingzhen *Nusi*. The land and the original seven rooms built were a donation from Beidajie Mosque. Several Muslim women repaired the houses and invited Ma *Shiniang*, the wife of an *ershifu (ahong* responsible for general duties) at Beida Mosque, to teach scriptures. The Mosque was confiscated by the authorities in 1958 during a political campaign and put to other use. When the new religious policy was implemented in 1983, women requested that the *Nusi* be restored to them. They repaired the buildings and invited a *nu ahong* to teach. In 1988, all the houses except for the prayer hall were enlarged and repaired under the leadership of the capable administrators. The newly rebuilt *Nusi* was enlarged to 13 rooms, covering an area of 310 square meters. In 1992, when the government handed over the land for redevelopment, the *Nusi* was forced to move away. After a discussion with all parties involved, it was agreed that the company taking over the land would build a new *nusi* in Minzhu Road, now called Minzhulu *Nusi*. This *Nusi* has been economically independent and run by self-reliant women from the start.

Beixiajie *Nusi*, built in 1916 together with the adjacent men's mosque, Jiefanglu *Nusi* in Xian, built in 1941, and Beidajie *Nusi*, were first built as a side wing of the men's mosque, with their finances also in the charge of male

administrators. These three *Nusi* were closed down in the 1960s and 1970s. After the implementation of more liberal religious policies since 1978, women have played an important part in the restoration of the women's mosques. Although the finances of both the men's and women's mosques are not kept separately, women have gained strong political consciousness and better management skills. *Nu Shetou* are elected deputies or members of the Administrative Committees of women's and men's mosques and use their voice frequently and authoritatively. But the priority of *nu ahong a*nd *nu shetou* remains the development of the *Nusi*, and takes place and shape under their leadership alone.

Dapiyuan *Nusi* in Xian was built in 1986 on funds raised by women themselves; its financial management has always been independent.

Houfuminli *Nusi* in Zhengzhou was built in 1943, when Liu Dengying *Haji* of the neighbouring men's mosque offered three of his private rooms in Tongshanli as classrooms for women to study ritual knowledge. In the late 1940s, the widowed Bai Duzhen *Ahong* came to the *Nusi* with her two children. The leadership of the men's mosque bought four or five of the rooms in Gujiayuan Courtyard for a price of 240 silver dollars, and asked Bai *Ahong* to instruct the dozen of old women how to worship. A new *nusi* was built under the central leadership of the men's mosque in 1996, but this time women played an active part in the reconstruction process. As the *nusi* was built under the supervision of the men's mosque, its finances are also managed by their administrators. Even after official registration with the government department, and establishment of its own Administrative Committee, dependency remains unchanged.

Wherever women's mosques were built under the leadership of men's mosques, their finance has always remained a responsibility of men.

Location of A Women's Mosque

The location of a *nusi* has direct bearing on the prospect of independence. It is almost impossible for *nusi* situated inside the men's mosque, sharing the same gate and courtyard, to gain independence. Only those located separately, with their own courtyard, are likely to become independent. Independent *nusi* in Zhengzhou and Xian share instructive characteristics in their physical and thus economic autonomy. Huhehot *Nusi* and Hexi *Nusi* in Zhoukou, in their separate locations, were managed independently by women from their beginning. Shitouxiang *Nusi* in Xian, Wuyingli *Nusi* in Zhengzhou, although poor, also run their own affairs. They too are located outside the grounds, and thus power, of the men's mosque. Dapiyuan *Nusi* in Xian, also situated away from the men's mosque, used to run its own affairs. Though the Men's mosque is acting on

behalf of it for the time being, its finances are still kept separately.

The Personal Influence of the *Nu Ahong* and *Nu Shetou*

Apart from the structural factors outlined above, the personal quality of a *nu ahong* and *nu shetou* must be considered for its impact on the possibility of independence and development of a *nusi*. The seven pioneering, independent *nusi* stand as the result of hard work, all of them associated with unusual stories of individual heroism and piety.

Whereas many mosque *nu shetou* are old ladies in their sixties or seventies, often with only minimal education, the situation in Beidajie *Nusi is* different. All its *nu shetou* are under the age of sixty and have received at least a primary school education, ail have joined the common cause of constantly improving the standing of their *Nusi*. However, the knowledge and competence of Du *Nu Ahong* and Dan *Nu Shetou* are particularly important to the success of Beidajie *Nusi*. Albeit brief, an introduction to the work of Du Shuzhen *Ahong* and Dan Ye *Shetou* at Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou will shed some light on the personal calibre of leading women who shape the usual culture of women's mosques.

Du Shuzhen *Ahong*, 73 years old and a native from Kaifeng, enjoys great respect for her learning and her moral integrity. She was appointed to her current position in 1981, and immediately took action to raise money for the reconstruction of the *Nusi*. The high regard for her caused many Muslims not only in her *fang*, but also in neighbouring *fang*, to contribute generously. *Nietie* from washing *maiti* and *kaijing* in a large community, with the contributions especially large during the days of fund-raising, added to the reconstruction fund. The legend says that in order to facilitate the progress of reconstruction, Du *Ahong* did not leave the mosque grounds for over two years. The successful completion of this splendid women's mosque has added to Du *Ahong'*s reputation as pious, pure and a role model for all Muslim women. Two pilgrimages to Mecca, in 1992 and 1996, have also reinforced admiration for her indomitable spirit and superior spirituality.

Dan Ye, Chair of the Administrative Committee of Beidajie *Nusi*, is a Henanese in her early sixties. A graduate of a technical training school run by the Henan Bureau of Mechanics, she became a senior engineer in a large factory in Zhengzhou, later put in charge of technical projects. After retirement, this pious Muslim placed her considerable expertise and planning abilities at the disposal of the Mosque. When she was invited to take charge of administration, only one Administrative Committee for both the men's and women's mosques existed. The reconstruction of the *Nusi* was the greatest project so far for the

now independent administration. By widespread consensus, Dan *Shetou* acquitted herself admirably. She was always in total control of the work and the many workers needed to do the job. Now she is actively drawing up plans, together with Du *Ahong*, for the further financial consolidation of Beidajie *Nusi*.

Government Policies and Economic Independence

When the government requested in 1993 and 1995 for all religious institutions and locations to register, it provided *nusi* with the appropriate qualifications with an opportunity to establish legal independence, and for *nu ahong* and *nu shetou* equal rights and a chance to participate in social and political activities. This has naturally pushed forward the movement towards independence for many a women's mosque. Some *nusi* became economically separated from the men's mosques only after they were registered as an independent mosque, as was the case in Beidajie *Nusi*, Beixiajie *Nusi* and Xishilipu *Nusi* in Zhengzhou, and in Jiefanglu *Nusi* in Xian.

Generally speaking, since 1978, and a more liberal turn in official religious policy, women's mosques have increased quickly in number and enlarged in size. Where one mosque registers, expands, or enlarges its functions, other mosques tend to follow suit. Where previously women made no demand for their own religious space, they now become aware of the absence of rights other women elsewhere enjoy. During 1996, Qingpingli Mosque in Zhengzhou was under reconstruction. With no history of a past *nusi*, the Mosque is now building a women's mosque adjacent to its own grounds.

Against a background of higher regard for religious education for young and older women, for increase in the number of regular female worshippers, for attention paid to the coupling of secular and religious schooling for young Muslims and thus pressure for mosques to provide suitable qualified services, and with the improvement of economic conditions in the countryside as much as in the urban areas, religious leaders will see the effective and competent management of a modernised administrative structure as a high priority for those women's mosques which seek to play a more forceful role in Muslim community affairs.

Part IV

Claiming Heaven

Chapter VIII

Between Allah and Modernity: Re/Engendering the Past

> We can write the history of that political process only if we recognise that "man" and "woman" are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions (Joan W. Scott, 1989:99–100).

This chapter asks how contemporary women construct and engender the 'past' and filter 'memory' to create a context of meanings which affords identity in all its multi-facettedness. In situating women's history in the lifecycle structured by Islam, Confucianism, and secular cosmogonies, and in the metaphysical domain of fear and longed-for transcendence, we evoke the timelessness and specificity of gendered subjectivity, as outside the linearity of chronological history and yet engendering its own genealogies. These active processes of identity formation are organised around preeminent discourses on justice *(gongping)*, equality (*pingdeng)* and purity *(jiejing/ganjing)* through which women experience, and validate, their place within binary, but not rigid, frameworks of secular and religious belonging.

Issues in Interpretation

Ortega y Gasset, in his writing (1962), has best characterised for us the existential as well as political place of the individual in historical processes. In Ortega's words, 'We think about our environment, and this thinking creates for us an idea, a map, an architectural design of the pure problem, of the chaos which in the first instance our surroundings appear to be. This architectural design which thought lays over our surroundings, interpreting them, we call *world*, or *universe*. This is not given to us, nor is it simply there; it is created by our convictions' (1962:24; italics in text). However, this does not mean that the historian should lose herself to the treacherous sands of subjectivism. In defining

themselves through the very management of life, Ortega argues, people render transparent the 'vital' structures of possibilities and constraints arising from historical contingency. It is in this confrontation with, and interpretation of, a native environment that human beings become agents. Not the practice of empiricism but an investigation of how facts are placed in the human scheme of things is the challenge before a historian. 'Thus the reality of the fact lies not within the fact itself, but in the indivisible unity of every life' (1962:17). In seeking to understand how Chinese Muslim construct for themselves 'the indivisible unity of every life', or what in a post-structuralist terminology has been defined as a problem of 'subject positionalities' (Zito & Barlow, 1994), readings must allow for their dynamic constitution, historical and cultural contingency, yet note the specificities of time and place. Borrowing from Barlow's thinking (1994) about the formative influences of *li* (the 'protocol' which shapes the historical subject as gendered and relational, situated but never determined) in Chinese culture, we propose to present two major sources of differing, variously conflictual and dialogic systems of *li* as two central protocols which embodied women's social experiences: in relation to the 'Chinese' aspect as a secular identification (as *zhongguo funu)* and to the 'Muslim' aspect (represented by Arab Muslim women) as a negotiation of a culture-specific Islamic faith and Muslim identity (on the conceptual distinction between 'Islamic' as ordained and 'Muslim' as historically contingent, see Farida Shaheed, 1994:2).

We situate our discussion of gendered historical consciousness within the fluid, interactive and dynamic dimensions which Ortega ascribes to the hermeneutics of life. It would be naive however not to be mindful of the problematic of identity, individual or collective, and the dangers of its reification particularly salient in cross-cultural contexts. Handler (1994) has pointed out the distortions that lie in a universal application of a homogenising Western epistemology of individual identity, which for Handler contributes thus to a reinforcement of nationalist and hegemonistic discourses, and to simplifying constructions of identity as immutable. The sources of personhood of the Hui Muslim women of *zhongyuan* (Central China), we see as nourished by sources of religious and secular authority that are interpreted out of the contingencies of scriptural gender definitions, myths and legends from Hui culture, political and social changes and projections of religious paradigmatic lives that overlay encounters with Arab Muslim cultures perceived as *asala* (Allah's blueprint of authentically lived Islam).

Past and Present

In conversations with women about events that occurred in the past, even in the recent past, their most common response is to turn to men for explanations; female *ahong* defer to male *ahong*; women worshippers defer to men, not only those in authority; wives turn to husbands. History, the official, chronicled and chronological history, is the business of men, because it is considered the creation and product of men. This observation applies no less to the documented history of Hui Muslim. It is through the renaissance of late Ming/early Qing Hui intellectual projects of transliteration, translation and education (described in earlier chapters) that much of Hui memory is built – projects of which women were important objects, not their shapers. But if through such cultural feasts, collective memory is created and maintained (Fentress & Wickham, 1992:127–137), they transmit memories of a lasting collective imprint of separate faith and common habitat, and also of a distinctive, gendered distribution of power and knowledge. The analysis in Chapter II of this volume of the contributions by the great initiators of the Islamic renaissance, Wang Daiyu (ca. 1584–1670), Ma Zhu (1640–1711) and Liu Zhi (ca. 1655–1745), can be read as such a commemoration of gendered memory. Even the fragmented oral accounts of a given community's history of settlement and dispersion, the establishment of a mosque, relations with Han society or impact of *ahong* on piety of a congregation, are told authoritatively only by male voices. The history of women's mosques themselves and their generations of attached female *ahong* about which their congregations profess to know little, are told most often in consultation with men. What is this 'past' then in the consciousness of these women which appears of a very different constitution from men's past (once questions venture beyond the publicly sanctioned, and collectively memorised, party – and government history)? How do women imagine their history; how is it structured; how is it told? Whereas now there is substantial literature which asks questions about how history creates gender and gender-consciousness (importantly, J.W. Scott, 1989) we know relatively little about how gendered consciousness constructs memory, personal or social. Historians of memory (Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Le Goff; 1992; Gillis, 1994; Flalbwachs, 1992) remind us that in examining the constitution of women's memory, it is not memory per se which is at stake but the nature of its processing through interpolations from official discourses, its management and selective prompting, the fissures and collective amnesia created by dominant narratives and silenced dissonance.

In his study of *History and Memory*, Le Goff borrows from Claude Lévi-Strauss' distinction between constructions of the past and the present in 'hot' societies as opposed to those held in 'cold' societies (1992:7). The 'cold' society

is characterised by a weak differentiation between past and present, with the time between the mythology of Creation and the present 'usually "flattened out"'. It is 'atemporal' as 'it tries to grasp the world simultaneously as a synchronic and as a diachronic totality' (qu. Lévi-Strauss, in Le Goff, 1992:7). Through myth and ritual, past and present are constantly reinvented in shifting constellations as separate, as identical, and as mutually encroaching on each other. Le Goff sees this as an 'ideological' history where facts are assembled to substantiate 'certain established traditions', and where myth and history interflow freely, centred on its beginnings in a 'mythical charter' (qu. Nadel and Malinowski respectively, in Le Goff, 1992:56). But the historical consciousness of religious women gravitates most strongly toward another temporal category, which A. Schwartz calls the 'projected time, the time of an imagined future' (quoted in Le Goff, 1992:9), or which Muslim women think of as the afterlife, *houshi*. It is this projected future which infuses women's consciousness of the past.

PLATE 7: Yang Yinlian *Ahong* with her congregation on *zhuma*, Eastern Mosque, Harbin. 18 April 1997 (Jaschok)

Phenomenologically understood, lived time, as Ma *Ahong* from a Kaifeng women's mosque put it, is a state of pious waiting for that which God has already willed to happen. The past is contained in the pages of the Koran, evoked daily to endure the ever-anticipated future and imagined with much trepidation (see Chapter X). In the construction of gendered historical consciousness, it is necessary to be aware of the presence of pivotal belief among these Muslim women of a non-negotiable causality between the past, which contains the blueprint of the divine will, and the future, predetermined in its prospect of eternal life in paradise or hell.

Feminist scholarship has paid scant attention to women's perceptions of the past. In a rare but brief treatment of women's historical consciousness, Fentress & Wickham (1992) argue that it is possible to situate it as distinct in *type* from men's consciousness. Narratives reveal relatively little group consciousness as women's role in society commonly precluded the emergence of a collective identity; this in turn has made public celebrations and commemorations the domain of men. Even the style of narration has been appropriated by men which is appropriate more for the commemoration of (male) public activities rather than female experience. Male official discourse drowns out a textuality which could reveal other kinds of testimonials (Fentress & Wickham, 1992:137–140).

Patterns in West European women's narratives of the past are summarised by Fentress and Wickham as related only peripherally to public events, reflecting their inferior status in society; as recollecting common public events in terms of 'everyday aspects' and 'small-scale' activities, thus different in substance from men's recollections; and also as tending toward more precise and accurate, often irreverent, accounts of the minutiae of domestic and emotional events which involve relationships. 'For the women, memory was of ongoing experience, rather than of personal choice' (Ibid: 142). Where choice is involved, men and women remember differently. Men are more likely to emphasise achievement and attainments whereas women are likely to reflect on powerlessness and personal cost such as additional burden, fatigue, under-recognition. Fentress and Wickham thus found that similar experiences could make for 'social memories that were genuinely divergent in *type*' (1992:143, italics in text). Their findings tell us that factuality, orderliness, chronology, that is, the methodology of 'objective' history (Le Goff, 1992), sit uneasily on the historical consciousness of women. When we therefore locate women's memory, understood as subjective and 'inscriptive' (Gillis, 1994:4) rather than descriptive, within the

objective history transmission, we must remind ourselves of their vulnerability to personal and repressive power politics.

How can gendered memory be situated within a collective historical narrative that tells of (Hui) minority identity in the Chinese state? Within this specific context of authoritarian appropriation of the transmissions and transmitters of 'correct' history, non-official versions become 'secret' or 'oppositional' (see R. Watson, 1994, on relationship between memory and history), transmitted solely in inner circles or given out on carefully judged occasions to outsiders (i.e. Aisha's conversion, Chapter XI). It is in this 'domain of the evocative transcript, silent disagreement, passive resistance, and erupted memory' (Watson, 1994:19) that women speak their own history of longing and fear.

The Shaping of *Zhongguo Funu* (Chinese Women); The Meaning of Liberation

One of the few ethnographic treatments of the shaping of social memory in China comes from the anthropologist Jing Jun (1996) who studied the shifting dynamics of a localised social memory (a Gansu village) under political and cultural siege. Jing points out that we understand too little about grassroots reactions to, and defences against, internalisation of manipulations from the top, facing researchers with the need to confront 'the attempts of Maoist social engineers to dictate remembrance and forgetting' (1996:18). We understand still less about the violent shaping of body and mind of women which transpired in the wake of Communist Party assumption, and consolidation, of power in the years following 1949 (since the early classic texts that concentrated on the relationship between women and the State – e.g., Croll, 1978; Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983; Wolf, 1985 – there have been few paradigmatic shifts, but see Zito & Barlow, 1994; Hershatter, 1997).

Another context is given by Hui traditions of remembrance and mythologising of its roots. Historians like Hobsbawm (see discussions in Le Goff, 1992), in considering the role of innovation and social reform in past-attached society, speak of a 'renaissance' – 'in the form of a return to the past' (Ibid: 9). Can women be said to have the same engagement in a collective past history and the in-built commitment to the model it proposes for society's future? We contend that when Muslim women evaluate, judge and act as 'Chinese women' we must note a central ambiguity which is the result not only of fateful memories of violent psychological and cultural social engineering, particularly salient in the 1950s and '60s, but also of positive experience of the social and political benefits to women of Maoist sexual egalitarian policies. As early as 1927, Mao

Zedong describes in his famous ‘Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan’ the central instrumental role played by women. In a memorable anecdote of how peasant women taunted and dared the combined forces of clan, husbands and religion, he tells us, ‘The old rule barring women and poor people from the banquets in the ancestral temples has also been broken. The women of Paikuo in Hengshan County gathered in force and swarmed into their ancestral temple, firmly planted their backsides in the seats and joined in the eating and drinking, while the venerable clan bigwigs had willy-nilly to let them do as they pleased’ (qu. in Sommer, 1995:305).

How did the rigorous political campaigns shape minority, including Hui Muslim, women, into appropriate female subjects of a revolutionary order? How differently did women respond to the call to rejoice at new-found freedoms, including religious freedom, at the same time as religious authority came under attack and demarcations between ethnic self-determination and superstitious dependencies grew increasingly ragged? ‘*Funu* meant national female subject. It had originally taken shape during the years of the party’s guerrilla war, within powerful propaganda discourses that set *funu* up against “imperialism,” “the West,” “bourgeois feminism,” and “landlord oppression.” … The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] offered itself as the nation’s salvation and justified its own authority in part on the grounds that it had liberated China’s women: as the Central Committee was to the people, so Fulian [All-China Women’s Federation] was to the *funu*. That is why *funu* meant national woman, or, more precisely, national woman under a Maoist-Communist state inscription’ (Barlow, 1994:345). How were Muslim women led to ‘turn over’ *(fanshen)* their lives in the 1950s which saw the most direct attacks on beliefs, conduct and life-styles of Muslim women? Scholars such as MacInnis (1989:220) have maintained that Islam, due to its strategic geopolitical significance, and wide dispersion, suffered less than other religions. This is not altogether borne out by the following readings. We have been using as a main source issues of the magazine *Zhongguo Muselin* (Chinese Muslim) published by the China Islamic Association between 1957 up to 1959 (subsumed under the bibliographic heading of *Zhongguo Muselin)*, when it was forced to cease publication. It was revived in 1981 and continues until today.

The overarching discourse is on patriotic duty incumbent upon all Chinese subjects, with minority people encouraged to manifest solidarity with the national goal of unity, cohesion, internal consolidation and external strengthening. Women’s progress from downtrodden and feudalistic ‘minority women’ to participants in production of labour as model worker tractor drivers, producers of chemical fertilisers, or dedicated *ganbu* (cadre) working for their

Muslim sisters and the national cause, are recurrent themes and powerfully symbolic of the elevation of 'peripheral' cultures to a higher stage of socialist enlightenment through the physical and psychological remoulding of women. The intensive early years of ideological campaigns that were carried on in Muslim areas need to be treated in terms of a 'subject positionality' (see Zito & Barlow, 1994:1–15; Barlow, 1994) of Muslim women, and the differentiated responses arising from situated status, grievance, and expectancy. This is then to forestall a simplistic homogenisation of 'Muslim community' and instead locate a tightly-fought battle between local religious leadership and the Party apparatus over heart and body of women in the context of a conscious political strategy to create and exploit a divided, because gendered, loyalty.

In the 1950s, campaigns to consolidate control over minorities and propel their 'backward consciousness' into a Maoist worldview, gathered momentum (see MacInnis, for documentation of official policy in post-1949 China, 1972, 1989; also Israeli, 1981; Gosh, 1961; Luo Zhufeng, 1991:69–72). Although Mao had in 1957 classified religion as a 'non-antagonistic contradiction' among the people, an initial moderate program for change, consisting of education, persuasion, and consciousness-raising, soon yielded to shriller voices of ideologues impatient with the lack of progress (MacInnis, 1972:13–14, 50–69; Yu Xiang & Liu, 1964); only struggle was thought to bring about change in consciousness and material conditions. The elasticity of political definition of 'superstition' (popular and folk traditions, to be eradicated by the Public Security Apparatus) and officially-sanctioned 'religion' (condensed into the five official religions, managed by the Religious Affairs Bureau: Daoism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam), of application of political labels of 'antagonistic' and 'non-antagonistic' contradiction, of distinctions between a 'religious' person exercising the right of religious expression and a person 'cloaking evil deeds with religion', intensified among believers a sense of menace and insecurity. Tensions were exacerbated by the sheer arbitrariness with which cadres could refine and reinvent such distinctions (see David C. Yu, 1994:1–2). The divide drawn between 'progressive' forces in society, supportive of Communist-Maoist construct of a new society and the new citizen, and 'the forces of reaction', came to focus on religious life as a central oppositional force, its dismantling facilitated by a familiar, revolutionary terminology from juxtaposed paradigms of enslaved and liberated womanhood. The discourse over issues, political correctness and its defined opposite, political feudalism, was particularly intense in the official organ of the China Islamic Association, the *Zhongguo Muselin*; because the readership, most importantly Muslim community leaders, were also those most directly targeted by the systematic

dissemination of political lessons and warnings. Women discussed in these articles are Muslim women from all ten minorities which constitute the Muslim population, but they most often belong to the largest, the Hui, Muslim minority. Other minority women, such as the Dongxiang*zu*, the Sala*zu* or Baoan*zu* women, seem to appear whenever there is need to refer to a hierarchy which classifies women in line with criteria of secular progress. (Soviet women are deemed to have achieved highest progress; they are followed by Han women. Hui women are lower down the scale but ahead of other Muslim minorities, see *Zhongguo Muselin*, 1959, Nol:3; No.1:9).

Clear boundaries are drawn between 'the Muslim woman in the past' and 'the present-day Muslim woman'; its binary demarcation coincides with the victory of Communism in 1949. The criteria for 'past' and 'present' constructs are unambiguous and mutually exclusive. Dominated in the 'old society' by the twin-evil of 'religious privileges' *(zongjiao tequari)* and 'feudal oppression' *(fengjian zhidude yapo)* the rejected paradigm is characterised by segregated life whereby women were confined to the home, excluded from productive labour and social activities. They suffered denigrating treatment; were men's private property to do with as they pleased, including physical punishment and even murder as an extreme patriarchal prerogative. Although these features were shared by all Chinese women, in the late 1950s minority women were seen as still more greatly affected by lingering legacies of sexual oppression, whereas Han women as newly-liberated women were now held up as models to be emulated by the more backward minority women. Unique to Islam however were other features, the direct result of membership of Muslim community. These were most prominently listed as the practice of polygyny, child marriage (at the age of nine, a Muslim girl was considered marriageable), a husband's right to divorce his wife through 'verbal renunciation' (*kouhuan*), constraints on widow's remarriage and women's lack of public visibility. Repeatedly, references stress the significance of Muslim dress *(Zhongguo Muselin*, 1959, No. 1:6–7).

Interesting parallels can be discovered in the centrality of women's dress to symbolic and political demarcations of progressive as opposed to backward lifestyle in Western discourses over *hijab* and the place of women in Muslim society (for example, Ahmed, 1982, 1992; Mehdid, 1993). It is less well-known that this was similarly foregrounded in early Communist critiques of Muslim praxis. Head-dress (*gaitou)* or headscarf (*miansha)* serve as a most poignant symbol of dependency *(yilaixing)* of Muslim women. The blame is squarely placed on religious leaders and 'propagandists of certain religious rules' who are quoted in uncompromising mood: '"If Hui women go outside, and their skin and

hair are displayed in public, this is damaging to "*yimani*" [faith], after death they shall enter "*duozaihai*" [purgatory] (*Zhongguo Muselin*, 1959, No.l:14). The article comments that given such strictures it was inconceivable for women ever to entertain hopes of achieving independence.

Whereas the 'feudal' construct denotes confinement (physical and mental), strictures, dependency, powerlessness, the 'new woman' is everything the fettered woman of old could not be: unrestrained by *halamu* (taboos on women's movement) and female conduct associated with true *yimani* (faith). Freed from domestic constraints (for which commune amenities provided), freed from patriarchal rule, encouraged to take initiatives to better their education and skills in order to contribute their labour to society, women were now held equal inside and outside the home *(Zhonguo Muselin*, 1959, No.1:4–5). Thanks to the 'Five Unafraids' (*wu bupa*; not afraid that the cupboards contain no wheat-flour; not afraid of finding no firewood in the kitchen-stove; not afraid of men's temper, not afraid of finding cold food when returning home from labour; not afraid of the chores of cooking and crying children) and 'Five At-Ease' (*wu anxin*; at ease over production; over assembly in public; over leisure; over study; over nourishment), women could realise their potential and become equal participants in the cause of socialist construction *(Zhongguo Muselin*, 1959, No.1:7). In January of 1959, a theoretical essay in the *Zhongguo Muselin* proclaimed that Muslim women had begun to walk the path of equality, some had removed their head-dress, others had unbound their feet, in order to join men as equals (No. 1:3).

Religious praxis could thus be effectively demonized by its impact on women, at the same time that the progressive legislative, socio-political changes wrought by the Communist Party in women's lives, shored up their claim to the legitimacy, and urgency, of this revolution. Noticeable was the cautious language employed, 'some' women had 'begun' their walk towards an 'independent, equal life' (Ibid.). Urgent writings concerned themselves with the obstacles that slowed down the process of liberation. The most outright venom and hatred was reserved for what was considered the sabotage by 'some bad religious elements' *(zongjiaojiede yixie huai fenzi)*, on the whole *ahong*, and mostly, but not exclusively, male (MacInnis, 1972:13–14). Again, women were called upon to charge their *ahong* with a whole catalogue of abuses, corruption, deceit, and their continued denigration of women as 'devils' (*yibulise)* because of their public consorting with men in commune meetings and field labour and during their leisure time. (The *Zhongguo Muselin* magazine during this time provocatively featured 'happy Muslim youths,' taking time off from arduous labour, with young women and men in close proximity with each other, dancing

and singing extracts from the revolutionary cultural repertoire).

Women were reminded of the impact of 'superstition' *(mixin)* on their level of education and knowledge of society and reminded of opportunities now open to them under the new Government (1959, No.1:14; see the March issue of 1958, and an extended discussion on minority women's need for political representation). Writings suggested that as the most oppressed of all, women could only through these struggle sessions come to realise the extent of historical injustice and the extent of gratitude owed to the Party. Photographs of bowed *ahong* submitting to vociferous accusations from female members of their family and congregations, vicious cartoons detailing corruptive practises which had turned mosques into oases of dissipation and decadence, were supplemented by profiles of particularly despicable 'bad elements' among leaders and tales of feudalistic prerogatives that made ignorant believers hand over young daughters to serve as wives (see December issue, 1958; for a tale of female sacrifice to ignorance, see 1959, No,1:6). Whereas there was no outright attempt to forbid religious faith as such, or the religion of Islam in particular, the ideological equation of a mosque-based religious way of life under a hierarchical patriarchal leadership, made it appear an integral part of all that was still blocking collective progress and individual development. Yet, the very need to continue with attacks on religious organisation also testified to its continued sway over the allegiance of believers, referred to as the 'backward consciousness' of the Muslim masses with barely concealed distaste and a strong censure of a way of life seen as falling outside, or behind, contemporary Maoist visions of the ideal society. (Israeli, 1981; D.C. Yu, 1994). But it is needful not to subsume indiscriminately men and women under a homogenised construct of 'Muslim masses'.

From the women's point of view, shifts from home to the site of field and factory, work in mixed company, prioritising of secular education for meaningful contributions to the new society, attacks on all levels of accustomed authority, and a most intimate physical intervention, the discarding of Islamic dress as an outward, physical manifestation of an accustomed code of ethical conduct, must have seemed the entry into an uncertain and uncharted territory. It was a fearful and troubling time of transition for many, but surely also exciting in the promise of life suddenly opening up beyond home and neighbourhood. Clearly, whatever the ambiguity women of different stations, ages, and backgrounds must have felt about opportunities in society and changes in their home environment, they had more to gain than men. Articles relating the recalcitrant attitude with which religious (largely male) community leaders pondered changes, and, in the case of Lianwu*xiang* in the self-governed Hui county of Zhangjiachuan, then consisting of 1,245 households, sought to resist these, are enlightening *(Zhongguo Muselin*,

1958, No.7:19).

The article about Lianwu*xiang* was published in 1958. In the eight years that had passed since women were encouraged to throw off feudal fetters, the women of Lianwu*xiang* had not once participated in movements or campaigns. Their life was still unchanged, in line with the local saying: ‘men work themselves to death, women at home take no interest’ (Ibid.) But as the writer, Ma Chengyuan, points out not the women but the leadership had to be blamed. Religious leaders had as early as 1953 prohibited the organisation of a women’s association; had barred their women from attending public assemblies; and interfered with the marriage law’s provisions for freedom to marry. The leadership reasoning was interpreted by Ma as suggestive of fear of women whose enjoyment of equal rights might no longer render them malleable to male tyranny. Another important factor, concludes Ma, had been the leadership’s manipulation of the women into believing that women’s exclusion from public life was expressive of the Government’s respect for minority traditional culture and customs. It took rigorous criticism and fierce struggle sessions, the article makes clear, before the leaders were made to see the error of their ways and women were able to ‘turn over’ *(fanshen)* a new leaf.

The subsequent challenge offered by women in Lianwu*xiang* to their menfolk is confirmed by this ditty:

> Before 1957, you never saw a woman’s face,
> since 1958 the whole mountain is covered with blossom after blossom of fresh flowers,
> do not look down on their strength,
> like men they become model workers (Ibid.).

This account of a community’s attitude to the likelihood and desirability of the impact of political reform foreshadows in its divisions the crucial place of gender in current analyses of Hui women’s negotiation for participatory powers in the religious sphere (see below). Again and again, religious leaders were reminded that their pronouncements of *halamu* on women’s conduct was now outside the realm of religion, would be regarded as obstructive to women’s liberation, and thus ‘in violation of the law’ *(shi weifan guofade; Zhongguo Muselin*, 1958, No.3:1). The Party declared war on the sole right of religious organisations to inscribe women’s bodies and minds in a new *li* (what Barlow calls protocol, 1994), declaring the legitimacy of a revolution’s prerogatives to re-appropriation of women’s allegiance, and in consequence women’s loyalty and gratitude; reserving for itself the sole right of production of meaningful life.

Only in recent years have women begun to ask for the Party's repayment for this loyalty in disputes over women's encroachment on male privileges (see Chapter X in particular).

Deconstruction and Construction of Female Subjects

Two representative profiles illustrate perceptions of women, both suggestive of desirable qualities of independence and dedication, in the old and the new context: the female *ahong*, Liu Wenjie, who became a target for struggle sessions in 1959, in Pingliang, Gansu border area, well-known for its solid Islamic faith *(Zhongguo Muselin*, 1959, No.1:15—16; also, MacInnis, 1972:167–175, for documents on persecution of Muslim leaders in 1958 campaign), and Ma Gualan as a heroine of the new era of women's liberation and celebrated Hui*zu* model worker from Yinchuan in Ningxia (1959, No.1:12). Both women share a capacity to take initiative and develop their native talent into a career which makes them stand out from other women, functioning as leaders and value shapers. But their crucial difference is that Liu *Ahong* manifested her independent and fearless spirit in opposition to the consolidating centralised ideology, which demanded complete adherence to Party and Government, thus 'revealing her true colours', as the title of the highly accusatory article put it. As a counterrevolutionary, who had assumed the 'cloak of religion' to harm the masses, she had turned into an enemy of the people. In contrast, the factory fitter and model worker, the nineteen-year old Hui*zu* Ma, is not only praised for selfless devotion to country and socialism, but also for being 'the Party's obedient good child' *(shi dangde tinghuade hao haizi)*.

Liu *Ahong*'s work among her congregations in Luoyang, Shaanxi, and in Pingliang, as well as in Shanghai and it appears, Hong Kong, is seen only in the light of anti-Party sabotage. This 'wolf in lambskin', 'running dog and henchman of imperialism', and alleged willing collaborator of Japanese occupying forces, is accused of smuggling guns and ammunition as well as trafficking in drugs (and moral criticism is heaped upon with pointed reference to shameless concealment of drugs in her vagina of which she allegedly boasted to others). We are additionally told she not only prostituted herself but also abused her influence over other women to yield themselves to immoral conduct. Her religious office, her authority over the congregation of the women's mosque where she presided, are interpreted as cloaking evil doings, harming not only the country but also the women who confided in her so trustingly. The mosque is depicted as shrouded in unhealthy and corrosive atmosphere, expelling obnoxious fumes which threatened the embryonic organism that was to support

an open, transparent, because Party-sanctioned, milieu of women's ideological and social education.

In contrast, the worker Ma seems to have stripped herself of any religious trace in order to join in the momentous mobilisation movement of the Great Leap Forward of 1958. There is no mention of her religious leanings. As MacInnis noted, the 'frantic production campaign' swallowed already precarious freedoms of religious activity, sweeping religious leaders and ordinary worshippers into almost total preoccupation with economic performance (MacInnis, 1972:282). Ma Gualan is presented as neither fearing fatigue, lack of private life or even lack of beauty (scarred in an accident, she insists on cultivating inner qualities), tirelessly caring for the well-being of fellow-workers, from making dumplings in her free time to mending socks after work, is seen to act in an identity (as model worker) and in a nexus of relationships (that of fellow-workers) which seamlessly transform personal attributes into revolutionary qualities applied to a collective cause. This appears in stark contrast to the character of a Liu *Ahong* with her alleged vilification of Party policies, of communal institutions and of the sincerity of cadres in representing the will of the masses. The demonisation of Liu turns her into a modern version of the traditional *huai nu* (femme fatale) of Chinese historical canons, the destructive and hostile Other on whose dismemberment the New Woman is constructed.

Dependency, sexual depravity, lack of patriotism, secrecy, deviousness are the characteristics embedded in a religious milieu of superstition, ignorance and female degradation. Its implacable enemy is the New Woman who struggles to untie the fetters of feudalism and ignorance that hold her down, and emerges into the light of consciousness of female worth and equality, and a devotion to the source of her liberation. Religious faith had no place, instead religion as a way of life was classified through a Government's program of toleration and protection of minority culture into a static museum relic, set in sharp contrast with the dynamic production of an enlightened secular, socialist female subject, *xiandai zhongguo funu* (for a theoretical underpinning, see Zito & Barlow, 1994).

Those *ahong* who proved more responsive to political pressures walked a fine balancing act. In the most explicit discussion of the imperative to reconsider the place of women's mosques which we could discover, Zhang Ziqian *Ahong* from a women's mosque in Hebei Province opposed increasing the number of sites of worship for women (1958, No.5:29). She reasoned that other Islamic societies have no such need, that at this stage in the construction of socialism Chinese society had even less exigency as such trend imposes intolerable economic burdens, diverts scarce labour and resources from national projects when women

could be worshipping more economically at home. And lastly, Zhou argues, in the light of women's state of ideological backwardness, the presence of a women's mosque would lead to their absence from political meetings, literacy classes, and even housework could be neglected. One must therefore conclude that a liberated woman's rights do not include participatory rights within the sphere of religion. Not only the authority of religious leaders had thus been castrated, the authority of religion over its disciples' lives, the sphere of religious praxis, had been effectively surrendered.

Outside a Patriline of Faith

When Henan Muslim men and women talk about their ancestry they talk about it in contrastive ways. For men, two sets of relationships define their identity as Hui Muslim and delineate their double exile. Exile from their spiritual home, Arabia, expressed in the frequent assertion, '*women dou shi alabo ren*' (we are all Arabs). This assertion of a spiritual descent is different from, but not in contradiction to, the known historical descent; most Central Chinese Hui came to China from Central Asia (on the conceptual parameters, and politicisation, of Hui ethnogenesis in the wake of the State's minority policies in the 1950s, see Dru Gladney, 1991, 1994; also, Israeli, 1980, 1981; Leslie, 1986; Voll, 1985; Chapter III in this volume). And, an admission of outsider status in relation to Han society, '*women don shi kerert*' (we are all guests [in China]). The fact of actual origin here is less important than an assertion of a cultural-religious identity. Julia Kristeva alludes to such a construct of 'Arab nation' when she speaks of 'a mythical product of Muslim religion, beyond cultural, economic, and political specificities' (Kristeva, 1993:45).

Tales and legends of Hui Muslim people's origin immortalise images of brave and faithful men. They saved the Chinese empire, shored up weak Tang emperors and served loyally the Mongol rulers. They opened up land, introduced new sciences and enriched commerce (abundant Chinese scholarship has documented Hui contributions to Chinese civilisation, see Ch.II.2; also Qin, 1992; Li Yanchen, 1988; Ma Da et al, 1986) and the men stayed because they had a mission and a contribution to make to the land of their host. These are stories of valour, heroism, suffering, but also of participation in empire building (also, see collection of Hui Muslim tales in Li Shujiang & Luckert, 1994). They also confirm descent from a patriline constructed of faith and steeped in the 'symbolics of blood', here borrowing from the terminology of John Borneman, suggesting a traditional, patriarchal configuration of social power based on inheriting blood (1996:216). This symbolism leads Dru Gladney, leaning on

Barbara Pillsbury's identification of 'blood ethnicity' as source of identity among Taiwanese Muslims (1978), to hypothesise that 'where emphasis on blood ethnicity is strong, Hui women's participation in religious activity outside the home is more strictly curtailed' (1991:238). Our work suggests that even where women have extended their activities into religious institutions, such as women's mosques, and positions of authority, a pervasive belief-system operates by which hierarchies of 'purity' and 'impurity', consequently spiritual 'insiders' and 'outsiders', are continuing to complicate not only inter-gender relations but also women's self-evaluation.

This points to an interesting difference in the 'transcendental importance' of women's spiritual contribution to a besieged community which Gillian Tett (1994) argues was the case in a Tajik Muslim community in the former Soviet Union which kept its faith alive through a division of labour: women kept the flame of religiosity in the haven of domestic space whilst men were good Communists. On the other hand, her study also reveals, although she does not draw out its implications, that once perestroika allowed for a revival of men's mosque culture (in which women had no part), women receded again into the background of religious life. We suggest the need for an interpretative rider, namely, the fact that religious faith was kept alive by women throughout the repressive Stalinist years to be re-subordinated as religious policies liberalised is perhaps indicative not only of the importance of women but also of the shifting and varied uses of women under an Islamic patriarchy always firmly in control.

In a poignant Hui tale, still frequently told (also appears in Li & Luckert, 1994), Han women presented to Muslim warriors served the purpose of seducing them into staying in the country. These women learnt to cook and adjust themselves to their husbands' ways of life. When they complained that they were unable to speak the language, they were consoled with the statement that it did not matter greatly. 'Eat Hui food; there is no need to listen to Hui words' (1994:249). What is the significance of this story? The Hui language is the language of faith, of the Koran. These women are deaf and dumb. They are marked as not belonging to 'the true descendants' of the faith. Tales of gendered origin are still conveyed in a common saying today among Hui in Ningxia, 'Hui father, Han mother' (Li & Luckert, 1994:238). In Henan Muslim are often heard to remark, '*nanren shi Alaboren, nuren shi Zhongguoren*' (Arab husbands, Chinese wives). From a 'patrilineal' perspective therefore, the first 'foreigners' in the beginning of Hui history in China were women (there are poignant parallels with the onset of civilisation of mythical Greece, made possible by the arrival of foreign women, the Danaides, Julia Kristeva, 1991:45). The memory of the early practice of exogamy forced on Muslim believers as a price for

survival endures and is as divisive as ever when the old *ahong* of a large mosque in Yinchuan (Ningxia) explains the absence of women from mosque life: ‘women are after all outsiders’ (*nuren jibenshang shi wairen)*.

From the women’s point of view then, it is imperative to add to the double inequality suffered in relation to Han society, in relation to men, which Pillsbury noted in her early study of Muslim women in Taiwan (Pillsbury, 1978), another burden: that of a lack of authentic ancestry. Unlike Muslim countries where women’s pivotal role (defined by patriarchal structures) in representing symbolic and political statements of a sovereign identity finds its roots in shared origins and faith, women’s roles in Muslim communities in China are overwritten by a still deeper, because historically and mythologically anchored, ambivalence perpetuated in the debate over authenticity and genderedness of spirituality.

If Muslim men must negotiate their sense of belonging and of ‘returning home’ to one’s ancestral home, and final resting place (*guizhen*), where do women belong in this diaspora of disparate attachments and identifications, of disparate frameworks of reference and validation? Frameworks which might derive from the Maoist construct of sexual egalitarianism, or membership of a minority status which, although it admits to considerable diversity, defines itself as periphery in often tense relation to the master narrative of the ‘civilising Center’ (Harrell, 1996).

Heaven and Earth

Elisabeth Croll in exploring the failure of the Communist Party in China to make women Half of Heaven, presents a thought-provoking thesis on its linkage with female-gendered notions of time and space. According to Croll (1994), the Heaven that was to be conquered and claimed by women as equal partners and beneficiaries of a sexually egalitarian society remained instead the unreconstructed *yang* space of patriarchal inscriptions. Women are as ever bound to the inexorable life-cycle that is the recurrent passage of Nature and Earth, caging them into a confined existence, unable to peer beyond the walls of domestic life. Thus defined by the womb-centeredness of traditional prescriptions for female lives which weighs on their hopes and commitments, utopian visions of a Heaven in this world remain the sole domain of men. Heaven remained thus ‘heaven as fate’ for women (Zhuo Xinping, 1988:143), as of old, beset by ambiguity, as Muslims and as women, guests in a foreign land. Could it be argued that Chinese cosmology and ‘the sacred pyramidal order’ which feminist Muslim scholars such as Fatna Sabbah (1984) hold enshrines gender asymmetry in Islamic cosmology are complicit in their exclusion of

women from Heaven, whether sacred or secular in construction?

Is marriage, in Croll's terminology the defining 'rupture' in the female life-cycle, indeed only to be understood in Croll's sense as 'death' and foreclosure, for each individual woman a passage of disenchantment and severance from Heaven? Mircea Eliade (1976) speaks of 'reciprocal translation' of metaphors of death and life, and we suggest a need exists to expand Croll's line of enquiry that goes beyond our present state of knowledge. We must learn more about the dialectical relationship between death and life which informs women's yearning to 'exist alike in time and in eternity' (Eliade, 1976:44). We agree with views which hold that the concept of women's liberation, by its very origin and praxis apparently antithetical to religion, yet shares with it profound symbolic systems of salvation and damnation, rites of liberation, and death mythologies. In arguing the close analogy of Maoist ideology of liberation with religion, MacInnis quotes Schurmann and Schell: 'Thought reform makes use of a powerful combination of emotional forces in the total manipulation of the individual participant. It employs no theologians, but it closely resembles an attempt at induced religious conversion – saving souls, stressing guilt and shame, demanding atonement, recantation, and rebirth' (MacInnis, 1972:310–311).

MacInnis poses an important question when he asks how new spiritual vitality could arise in the place of systematically dismantled values, visions, and commitments, to support the spirit and emotional and ritual needs of a people. When women talk 'history', they cite women's unique history anchored in the key structures of 'equality' and 'justice', born of often violent political experiences (the 'present' of Eliade's cosmology and the place of 'earth' in Croll's model of female life-cycle) and, related closely, in its religious equation, the female-specific dimension of 'purity' (*ganjing*, both as defining women's relations with God and with men) – 'purity' also as expressive of a future eternity lived for in much tormented hope. The stories of the transgressions of women's ancestress, Eve, of the Prophet's wife Aisha and his daughter Fatima, and the revelations of the Koran as well as the received traditions are fused into a collectively-shared vision that is God's ordained plan (*qianding)* for a gendered life. In *zhongyuan* (Central Chinese) religious culture, this collective identity is concentrated in a gendered space, the women's mosque, which reminds and warns women believers of the ever-present dangers and frailties inflicted on women's spiritual purity as a result of an early fall from paradisical grace. But social space, so Roberta Gilchrist in her study of medieval nunneries reminds us (1994), is a complex and active concept which changes as it is worked upon by life-experience, agency and will. Nowhere does Joan Scott's warning (1988) not to reify binary oppositions into fixed gender relations strike a

more resonant chord than in the constantly shifting triangularity of the dimensions of Muslim, Hui, and Chinese identity which constitute the building blocks for the life projects of women and men.

Reinventing Female Muslim Identity in Dengist China

The more liberal policies of Dengist and post-Dengist China have allowed for a further complication of this identity (for the context of a more dynamic diversification of paradigmatic womanhood in China since the mid-eighties, see Barlow, 1994). By giving women in Central China greater opportunities to push for rights in the religious sphere, it has both extended secular notions of sexual equality into a contested religious domain and expanded a discourse on authentic Islamic conduct in a tense dialogue with projections of 'Arab Muslim woman' – as emulated inspiration, or as oppositional Other.

Whereas the early Maoist years demanded total submission to an authoritarian blueprint, followed by crushing suppression of religious expression and closure of worship sites as the Cultural Revolution gathered momentum in 1966, a more liberal and flexible control of religious praxis was noticeable after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1979, and the adoption of Article 36 on religious freedom in 1982 (J. Dreyer, 1968; MacInnis, 1972:283–306, for attacks on religion as one of the 'Four Olds', & 1989, for subsequent shifts in religious policy; also, Jing Jun, 1996). These developments contributed markedly to opportunities for Muslim women to open up to new sources of inspiration, but also to shift and restate notions of dignity and equality in confrontation with the *asala* paradigm posed by 'the Arab Muslim woman'. It has therefore become possible for women believers to join a 'perplexing' official debate, held over the progressive breakdown of the Maoist paradigm which constructed the 'modern Chinese woman', as effective, if not entirely equal, participants.

In 1995, the Academy of Social Sciences researcher, the noted Hui scholar Feng Jinyuan, was asked by the All-China Women's Federation to submit China's official position on the status of Muslim women to the Beijing World Women's Congress, to be held in that same year. Feng, although well-published in the area of Chinese Islamic history, had not previously made his name in gender, or women-related, writing. His paper, subsequently published in *Zhongguo Muselin* (1995, No.4:19–24), places Islam in the official tradition of a historiography of progressive women's liberation ideology, thus legitimising continued adherence to Islam in terms of dominant definitions of appropriate womanhood. Highlighted are the revolutionary soteriological message of the

Prophet's revelations, stipulating unprecedented respect and protection for women's rights; secondly, the historical embeddedness of provisions designed to protect women (such as institution of polygyny); thirdly, the distinction to be made between Islamic protective provisions and Chinese feudal oppression that thus situates polygyny in a more (acceptable) light as compared to its manifestation in pre-Communist China; the distinction to be made between religious doctrine and cultural praxis in order to appreciate the Prophet's revolutionary contribution to solving 'women's problems'. Feng then moves straight to post-1949, and the strides the women's liberation cause made under Communism. It is implicit in his argument that whereas Maoist China took women further into the sphere of collective self-realisation than was possible under Islam, they are fundamentally in harmony with each other on the important principles of women's protection and respect for women's rights. With Islamic religion effectively stripped of its religious dimension and Maoism's atheistic self-definition de-emphasised, how does official history transfigure, or overlap with, women's personal recollections? What is the evidence for our conjecture that the violence of early days of Communist conquest which was inflicted on the bodies and minds of religious believers might be said in the case of women be balanced by other memories of gain? How are Islamic faith and ideological norms played out in current discourses on the meaning of equality?

Equality, Justice and Purity

Women shall with justice have rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have a status above women (Koran, 2:228).

Equality

The debate over equality is a complex and torturous one. It is taking its cues from the scripture as much as from the politicised context of women's attainments, shifting in interpretation as these exchanges take place in differing contexts and involve different parties and thus invested interests. From this complex web of negotiations and dynamic settings we shall disentangle the most significant contestations: firstly, what arguments are made in favour of, or against, women's exercise of religious authority? How strong are the rights of women to a separate, in certain cases autonomous, place of female worship, *nusi*? Secondly, to what extent have Maoist campaigns which equated public life and visibility with liberation of Muslim women affected perceptions of the primacy of women's function and responsibility? Thirdly, how has the

experience of women's liberation movements and political education campaigns shifted interpretations of older and younger generations of female religious leaders of the message of liberation that can be distilled from religious scriptures?

Underlying all of these questions is the extent to which a religious way of life, as separate from religious faith as a private right, is considered a matter of official concern in Dengist and post-Dengist China, especially if it is likely to violate state policies and regulations on women's rights (see above). *The Law of the PRC on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women* (adopted at the Fifth of the Seventh National People's Congress on 3 April 1992, promulgated and entered into force on 1 October 1992) states in Article 21: 'The state shall guarantee that women enjoy the equal right, with men, to work'. No mention is made of equal rights to religious careers. But differences in views on whether rights must be held to extend into the religious sphere can be observed not only as dividing men and women but also as pitching members of the same sex against each other. In 1996, we asked the head of the propaganda section of the All-China Women's Federation to clarify for us their position on women's religious work but elicited only evasive answers. Our query was in connection with a case which took place in 1996 in Henan, when irate leaders from women's mosques, threatened with hostile petitions from men's mosques to close them down, sought support from the Religious Affairs Bureau on the grounds that whatever rights men had to their own *nusi* and *ahong*, women, as Chinese female subjects, were legally entitled to enjoy also (see Chapter X). The very (secular) underpinning of Communist definition of an appropriate femininity was called into question by women *ahong* demanding representations at the highest level. Conversations with a Henan delegate to the NPC, a Hui woman in her fifties, suggested the ideological gulf in the way of communication with ACWF cadres (interview, May 1997). According to her, only a long and painful 'education' of Maoist women-work cadres will break the ideological mould which equates secular with enlightened, religious with superstitious and backward, worldviews. As an experienced educationalist and speaker on women's issues, who belongs to the Henan Provincial Women's Federation, put to me, for someone like her, by definition, 'only useless people believe [in religion]' *(mei gan shide ren cai xin*; conversation, November 1995). In conversations (October 1995) with the Hualong County Women's Federation leadership (a county on the border of Qinghai Province, where the Salaz*u* constitute the majority of Muslims), the director and deputy-director themselves of minority status, religion was characterised as keeping women in a backward and ignorant condition, out of school and productive labour and inside the

unchallenged regime of the patriarch and mother-in-law; religion ‘is not useful to women’ (*dm nuren mei li)*. When in the course of our conversations and observations factors such as underresourced education and backward communication infrastructure came to the fore, this still did not seem to challenge the validity of religion as an official cause of sluggish progress in women’s work.

On the other side, as the sexual egalitarian platform is part of the Communist Party’s self-definition, the official discourse among Muslim leaders will always pay tribute to the self-evident truth of such a principle. It is in the qualifications and pauses that the reservations and contestations lie and ambiguities can be discovered. In November 1996 we were confronted with the open-endedness of such debate when interviewing first religious leaders at a men’s mosque in Shanghai before moving on to the adjacent, but separate, women’s mosque (one of formerly four women’s mosques which existed in pre-Cultural Revolution Shanghai, reopened in September 1994, after considerable pressure from the local community of Muslim women and with the support of the China Islamic Association; see *Shanghai Muselin*, 1994, Vol. 48, No.3). We noted that sixteen nationalities worship at the mosque. The two *ahong* and one representative from the Islamic Association present expressed positive thoughts about the women’s mosque but stressed that in view of ‘doctrinal stipulations’ *(jiaoyi guiding)* it was not advisable to use the terminology of ‘*nusi*’, women’s mosque, and *nu ahong*, their preference was for *nuxue* and *shiniang* more in line with Islamic practice. That however due to women’s insistence on ‘sexual equality’ *(nan-nu pingdeng)* certain concessions were being made (which seemed to be largely of a linguistic nature). The teacher affiliated to the women’s mosque neither voiced criticism of this reservation nor changed her own terminology. In her description of the work among women Muslim, she only spoke of the educational and ritual activities taking place at the ‘women’s mosque’, led by a female *ahong* who commanded respect in the community because of her piety and erudition.

The teacher, in her late fifties, a member of the Shanghai Islamic Association and director of the Shanghai Women’s Mosque Democratic Administrative Committee (*Shanghai Qingzhen Nusi Minzhu Guanli Weiyuanhui)* is imbued with ideas of progressive education for women and women’s rights. A Henanese by birth, she is proud of the tradition of women’s Koranic schools and mosques and sees their origin in the May Fourth Movement (of 1919). Illustrating the road travelled by women and through their own initiative, she recalls the fund-raising campaign for the restoration of the Women’s Mosque, which included old ladies hobbling on crippled, because bound, feet up and down lanes and back-alleys in pursuit of contributions for a progressive cause. Women for her had

earned the right to a place of worship, education and congregation of their own. We were given an opportunity to celebrate *guerbangjie* (‘Idul-Adha, Feast of the Sacrifice) a year later, in April 1997, at the Women’s Mosque, attended by senior members of the local community of women Muslim as well as Government representatives. The commemoration of Ibrahim’s sacrifice of his son became in the speech of the old female *ahong* an impassioned reiteration of Muslims’, particularly women Muslims’, gratitude and devotion, to the Government. The theme of this gathering, which threaded itself through all of the speeches, was the contribution by the Party to the rights and privileges enjoyed by Muslim women through the establishment of their own sites of worship and women’s entry into religious leadership positions, unique among Muslim women in the world. The same male representative from the China Islamic Association who had confessed to ambiguities over such a quest joined in the ringing applause which followed each speech. The observers were reminded of a well-tried Maoist tactic of waving the flag to conquer the flag. The official presence is welcome to these women as it shores up their claims to authority not only in relation to men but also in relation to women in other Muslim societies (‘we are Chinese’). This assertiveness leads women *ahong* to stress the radical nature of early Islam and its liberating potential for women, given a strong contemporary challenge to shed the reactionary accretions of later developments. Ironically, it is Maoism-Communism which is best suited to uncover its true nature. Thus women have also refined their defensive strategies as international Islamic orthodoxy ponders the heresy of such innovations. In the world of Shanghai’s Women’s Mosque, the celebration of International Women’s Day (*san-ba)* and Fatima Day *(nu shengji*) are thus selective memory promptings of a collective past which is nourished by a nationalistic as much as religious pride in the hard-won dignity of Muslim women.

In Guangdong no *nusi* exist at present. In September 1996, Yang *Ahong* from the Huaisheng Mosque granted us a hearing on his views concerning women’s rights. After the 1930s, when the last Koranic school for women in Kezhu Lane was closed as Japanese forces invaded the province, no other separate institution for women was ever put in place. Yang *Ahong*’s explanation for the situation in Guangdong was the successful attainment of full equality by women which rendered such separate sites and female leaders redundant. Indeed he delicately hinted that the explanation for Central China’s rich women’s mosque culture lies in the poor state of women’s spiritual and religious understanding.

In Harbin, the equation of women’s rights with the right to occupy religious leadership positions in their own sphere of activity was left in no doubt. The head of the Harbin Islamic Association began his introduction with the question

as to why there are women's mosques and *ahong* in China, and answered it by referring to Chinese society's support of sexual equality (interviews, April 1997). Ma '*Zhuren* (title of director) pronounced the current quarters which serve women for ablutions and worship as unsatisfactory. A separate women's mosque would need to be provided (as it had been the case before 1959). His audience, Yang *Ahong* and a woman elder, were pleased to receive such an official blessing of their long-standing demands. The *ahong* continued to express her gratification during later conversations, receiving emphatic support in the washrooms where women, preparing for worship, were pronouncing their satisfaction on being Muslim in China; thus they felt more equal than anywhere else in the Islamic world (also see Yang *Ahong*'s account of her work, Chapter XII).

In comparison with the situation of Muslim women elsewhere the unique innovations of *nusi* and *nu ahong* symbolise also the uniqueness of China's women's liberation. Unlike Arab women, unlike Western women, Muslim women are respected and protected, so a Muslim intellectual in Huhehot, Inner Mongolia suggested (conversations, June 1996) taking into account their 'special characteristics': equality in rights as well as the need to raise the level of education. These 'special characteristics' also in the newly resurgent Islam in parts of North and Northwest China may impede the entry of women into more senior positions. Whilst the role of women as educators is undeniable, it is in the mould of handmaiden to husbands that women realise their value to the community. Where Islam is at its most assertive, traditional gender roles and division of labour are most enduring.

To summarise a difficult and complex discourse. Women themselves demand sites of women-mediated faith as a matter of equality and recognition of their need for religious and ritual guidance. Representatives of the Islamic Association branches justify the political correctness of such a policy; this view is at least shared officially by many male *ahong* but with the added recognition that women's education requires special measures, and thus *bidaerti (bid'a)* is called for. As an old *ahong* put it: there is 'good' and 'bad' *bidaerti*. This is good. Do pilgrims not choose to fly to Mecca rather than walk as they used to? Paying attention to women's needs is appropriate for these times. Women's backwardness also however serves as ammunition not to grant them leadership positions, the opinion, not an isolated one, by the Guangzhou *ahong*, however the sophistry of his argument. Female *ahong* take issue on this same point, maintaining that only women can understand and remedy women's religious predicament which they see rightly as part of a more generalised familial and social predicament. Women like the assertive *ahong* in Central China are starting

to transform a practical necessity into an issue of right, but it is a complex struggle. Not least because of the embattled but defensive patriarchal establishment which presides over mosque life. As a young male *ahong* in Flenan admitted, ‘men are still dominant you know’.

But other voices also are being heard, foregrounding the virtues of education and sound knowledge in their writings and discussions. Women intellectuals tend to stress the crucial role the Prophet’s wife Aisha played in contributing to the emergence of an authentic religious tradition with her 2,210 accounts related to the Prophet’s sayings and deeds. Ding Jun (1996) also notes her intellectual calibre and depth of understanding of the Prophet’s revelation. She situates Aisha both in a religious tradition as a central influence in the shaping of religious tradition, and in a secular position as impressively educated and knowledgeable about history and affairs of her country. The reason that so many women take the name of Aisha, Ding maintains, is not only because she is ‘“the mother of believers”, but more importantly, she presents women with a role model as an exemplary scholar with unrivalled profundity of wisdom.

The interpretation of Aisha and Fatima, most important role models for Chinese Muslim women, receives a different treatment when it comes from an independent and forthright woman *ahong*, such as Du *Ahong* of the most autonomous *nusi* in Henan. To her they are leaders of women in paradise and also, because of their formidable qualities, provide leadership for women on earth. They suggest knowledgeable, rights-conscious and independent women who are followed by women aware of their own God-given dignity, thus Du Ahong’s explanations. Any other interpretation is hotly contested as ‘prejudiced male chauvinism’ (conversation, October 1996).

In a competition organised by the China Islamic Association whereby younger *ahong* were given the chance to sermonise on a topic of their choice, one young woman *ahong* entered with ‘Views on Muslim Women’ (subsequently published in *Zhongguo Muselin*, 1996, No. 3). The theme was equality promoted by Islam and its contribution to the tasks of the new, modernising China. Role models were not confined to the Prophet’s family, but comprised internationally known Muslim leaders, such as the then female political leaders of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Also the names of Hui women were mentioned who had participated in the early Communist movement and, more recently, received national acclaim as successful female entrepreneurs. The message was strong: given an appropriate environment, Islamic respect and support for women’s education and public participation could bring considerable benefits to the motherland through women playing roles also outside the home.

The primacy of mothering and wife responsibilities is never in question. In all

discussions and diverse contexts this forms the central platform regardless of gender, religious tradition, age, or class. In question is what else may Islam allow for and Chinese society insist on. In Ningxia, an *ahong* in his fifties pronounced that it is good for women to take part in labour ('opens their eyes and improves the atmosphere at home') and to take on educational responsibilities to nurture the community's religious life (conversations, October 1995). Long conversations about women's central tasks as mothers ensued during visits at an influential women's Koranic school in Huhehot, and it was this construct of women's ordained nature that shaped the young female students' visions of future educational projects they expected to have a part in. But as one young *hailifan* (student) later pointed out in a letter to us, it could also be a source of power, not given to men, a source of pride thus in God's design that made women uniquely productive and reproductive (June 1996).

Discourses on women's domestic duties at times develop into tense debates between older and younger generations of *ahong* as to how these might impede women's spiritual duties (this theme is developed in Chapter X). Some of the rural *ahong*, steeped into a fanatical sense of duty to family on the one hand, and a morbid belief in Eve's fatal legacy to her daughters on the other hand, would give themselves and their congregations up to despair. This fatalism encounters challenge from younger *ahong* who see domestic confinement as neither inevitable, nor desirable, nor expected damnation for temporary escape from their duties to family.

A different set of criteria applies where issues of equal rights are considered not applicable to the religious sphere. Again, often in the more remote and rural mosque communities, protection of religious culture would encompass a protection also of customary ways of organising, leading, and segregating a community of worshippers. Women are caught in the binary arrangement that structures their time and energy around the hearth, and their fears around the fate of their soul on Judgement Day. In this context, sexual equality is a remote, non-Muslim reality which has little bearing on a life lived in dread.

It is among the politicised female leadership and the more urban population of Muslim women that the Koran, as in the case of the young *ahong* Mu Huafen, carries a liberating message. Thus Bai *Ahong*, in her sixties, resident at a Gansu women's mosque, blames feudalistic Confucian legacies for interfering with the Prophet's message of liberation (interview, October 1995). Thus Du *Ahong*, a Henan *ahong* of some standing in the community of believers (conversations during spring of 1996), not only dismantles certain Koranic pronouncements on the status of women (as one level inferior to men) as contingent on the nature of women's economic and educational predicaments, but also sees these in need of

reinterpretation as in China ‘men and women are equal, and women have attained independence’ *(nan nu pingdeng, nuren dedao ziyou)*. When returned women *haji* (pilgrims to Mecca) talk to eager listeners back in their mosque on the status of women in Saudi Arabia, which comes to stand for all Arab Muslim women, this turns into a point of reference for their own lives. The outcome is usually one of satisfaction at being Chinese. Arab women’s strict segregated lives, the voluminous cloth that covers the female form, lack of public status and participation, are all criticised as a sign of ‘low status’. As one particularly self-assured Henanese *haji* put it, they [Arab men] ‘are really very protective of women’ *(duoma baohu nuren)*, but on the other hand, she put to me, no Chinese woman could stand such a life. The consensus among women at this gathering was that only ignorance of another reality must prevent ‘Arab women’ from demanding equality with men which had been granted to them in the Koran (conversations, May 1997).

While no such sustained and systematic scholarly criticism of patriarchal accretions of Islam as discussed in Chapter II is as yet to be found in China, caught up in the interstices of ethno-religious protectionist policy, the presence of a mosque of one’s own is giving added impetus to challenge received interpretations of the Koran or selective use of Hadiths. ‘They [male authority figures] do not understand the Koran’ *(tamen bu dong gulanjing)* is the response to criticisms of women’s collective worship under an *ahong*, to aspirations to religious status equal to that of the male *ahong*. On more than one occasion the Hadiths used by male religious leaders came under attack from women for showing up their hostility to liberated women who now search for authorities and sources which reflect more closely their sense of dignity (such as the Hadiths translated and annotated by Chen Keli, a Henanese scholar and translator with progressive ideas about women’s education, in whose commentaries women can find support for women’s mosques and justifications for the *ahong* status; *Shengxun*, 1994, and widely known in Central China).

Justice

Closely related to the concept of equality is justice, *gongping*. Here too can be found the binary dimension of sacred and secular justice, but the former is because ordained (*qianding)* by God, not subject to negotiation. All *ahong*, whether of a progressive or a more traditionalist cast of mind, agree that ‘bad things are due to women’s doing’ *(huai shi shi funu zuode)*, its punishment manifest in women’s biology, childbirth-pain, earthly burden and for many, in women’s weak reason. Its conservative interpretation freezes women’s

accustomed life-cycle into immutability, 'because God willed it so' *(yinwei Anla anpaide)*. This raises for the elderly Shan *Ahong*, in a small Hui community in Henan, the heavy burden on women in this life and their scant hope for paradisical joys into an article of faith. Whereas for women like Shan *Ahong*, the very injustice in women's predicament between Eve and life on earth is expression of divine, thus inexplicable, justice, this tautological argument does not impress her younger colleague at another women's mosque. God's justice to all creatures, both men and women, is beyond argument for Mei *Ahong*, its message only obscured by the social injustices which prevent women from its full appreciation (conversations, November 1996). Education, she feels, must be improved, religious and secular, of *ahong* as well as their followers. In this the most important source of grievance over injustices is identified: the level of education to which women have access and which compares unfavourably to that available at men's mosques. Women's mosques are less well off economically and academically, a source of chagrin often voiced by women congregations. It is this which has become a cause for the Henan Hui representative to the People's Party Congress, Delegate Ma, to whom education is the single most important factor in accounting for minority women's backwardness materially and spiritually. On behalf of women's mosques committees she has begun therefore to lobby for more public recognition of the role which can be played by women's mosques, and for a more equitable share of resources granted by official departments, be it permission to build, renovate, or have political representation at provincial government level (conversation, May 1997).

Highest on Delegate Ma's agenda is the cause of education, its quality, women's access to it at different stages of their life-cycle, and the level of educators. Both secular and sacred knowledge must be the twin-platform on which to raise the collective status of Muslim women. One of the most important problems mentioned in conversations is early termination of girls' education in order to prepare for marriage. Representative is the voice of a 26 year old unmarried woman from Kaifeng, Henan who, caught between traditionalist parents and a stagnant religious education, could not realise her dream of 'facilitating religiosity' *(ban jiaomen)* among women. All she wanted was to 'be a person in her own right' *(zuo yige ren)*, she lamented, instead she will forsake her study and enter into a marriage which her mother chose for her (conversation, March 1997).

In Kunming, in conversations with young married women who are forced to stay at home to look after their children, the theme of injustice was heard throughout our visit. A 28 year old woman, the mother of two children, spoke in

a disenchanted voice about lack of provisions for someone like herself at a men's mosque (Kunming has no *nusi*); because worshipping at home she has no like-minded company or sympathetic ear to listen to her woes. To her, women's duties to the family are expressive of a rigid patriarchy rather than of God's design (conversation, October 1996). Men on the whole, whether Han or Hui, atheist or Muslim, are 'of a conservative cast of mind' *(naozili baosbou),* Guo *Ahong*, a 60 year old *ahong* from Kaifeng, maintains. Only women can redress the injustice of an education which perpetuates female ignorance and the gap between status aspiration and reality of gendered access to knowledge and thus authority (conversations, spring and autumn 1996/7).

Where religious knowledge is skewed in favour of men and religious rights to equal resources still contested, the concept of purity is a strong weapon. Purity as understood as *jiejing* or *ganjing* has the connotation of a Muslim way of life of ablution and worship, outer and inner cleanliness, strict diet and abstinence from stimulants. In that it expresses Muslim believers' adherence to a *li* (a ritualised life) which makes many when leaving their homes search for board and lodging suitably *qingzhen (halal,* Islamic diet). As a young woman put it to us, even when her family would leave the tightly-knit Hui community to travel, there was no mixing with Han people. Apart from informing Muslim people with a strong sense of separate cultural traditions, and superior *li,* women use the concept of *ganjing* to depict their relations with men, with men's mosques, or with a gendered spiritual tradition.

When Mai *Shiniang* in Henan explains why women's mosques are better off looking after their own affairs, it is because the adjacent old men's mosque is 'not clean enough' (*bu gou ganjing*; conversations, May, June 1996), and she was not just referring to the state of the mosque grounds. When Ma *Jiaozhang* speaks proudly of the 'cleanliness' *(ganjing)* of the women's mosque in Shanghai, its transparent management of alms *(nietie)* and its charitable function (for example, the funding of a primary school for a Hui community in Ningxia), she challenges Islamic orthodoxy's reservations and criticisms. When Zhengzhou women's mosques' congregations compare their *ahong* with the leadership of men's mosques, it is purity in its inner and outer aspect which ranks their achievements as superior to that of men's. The 82 year old Ma *Ahong* from Kaifeng places the value of equality far below what she considers the more central value for women, purity. She reprimands the politically active *ahong* for their deficient understanding of purity when, she says, it is in the purity of spirit that women have the potential to excel over men (conversations November 1995, May 1997).

Purity

Notions of purity among Muslim women in mosque communities in Central China are thought about and defined in relation to the construction of 'the Arab woman'. This paradigm of Muslim female virtue functions as a source of emulation and concomitant realisation of own shortcomings (see Ba *Ahong*, Chapter XII, and Shan *Ahong* below) in the context of which the absence of *hi jab* in a secular society becomes a story of exile. But she is also the 'Other'. This latter construct entails a self-definition through rejection of what are seen as Arabic patriarchal accretions of Islam.

To be a Chinese woman is thus to put claim to rights in relation to Islamic patriarchy. In the reinvention of religious continuity and belonging, the diaspora looks back at the source of Islamic faith in Arabia where women wear *hijab* and observe *purdah*, especially in the land of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. With that the question is raised of Muslim life in a secular, non-segregated, society. The pure spirituality of women who wear *hijab* for their faith cannot be matched by Chinese Muslim women, assert older generations of women *ahong*. Many women who had the chance to go on a pilgrimage, use their status as pilgrims, *haji*, to justify wearing a head-dress *(gaitou)*, the outward manifestation indicative of newly-raised spiritual status. (According to Yang Zhibo, since 1986, more than 30,000 Chinese Muslims have gone to Mecca; in 1996 alone, ca. 2,500 pilgrims became *haji*; the number of women increased in 1996 to one-third of the total number of pilgrims, this does not take account of privately-organised pilgrimages; Yang Zhibo in *Zhongguo Muselin*, 1996).

The peculiar diasporic predicament of Chinese Muslim women, with their common ignorance of the scriptures and language of revelations, in the case of many illiterate rural women dependent on *ahong* or male members of the family for guidance, is held against them as characteristic of women's nature, inclined to 'be superstitious' *(xin kufoule)*. The lack of female saints *(nu shengren)* in Sunni tradition is adduced as further evidence of God's infliction of impurity on women as an enduring mark of Eve's legacy. Shan *Ahong*'s essentialized Muslim woman 'is of a superstitious nature' *(nuren xinli you kufoule)* and therefore inclined to go astray, adding to a woman *ahong*'s responsibility and despair.

But if this deficiency is admitted, it is placed in women's relationship with God indicating closeness to, distance from their Creator. For the most independent of the *ahong*, men as mediators of knowledge are cancelled out as prejudiced, or as redundant. One of the most surprising conversations occurred in the washroom of the Harbin mosque's women wing where about twenty women were preparing for worship. It became a deconstruction of the patriarchal

God women felt to be upheld by men; one woman pronounced God to be without sex, without gender characteristics which therefore made God accessible to women in the same way that men had access. In other words, they need no male mediators to interpret God's revelations to the Prophet (conversations, May 1997).

Whilst purity is related to women's quest for spiritual equality, sometimes in the place of an elusive secular equality, it is not uncontested among women. In criticisms of economically well-to-do women's mosques, particularly if of another tradition, reformist *(yihewani* or reformist school) *ahong* are wont to level charges of 'unclean' practices *(bu ganjingde xiguan)* against the traditional school (*gedimu)*, reawakening memories of the historical *raison d'etre* of *yihewani pai* rejection of the earlier Sunni tradition, the *gedimu*, because of its loss of Islamic purity (on the Sunni traditions in China, see Gao, 1989; Wang Yongliang, 1990; Yang Huaizhong, 1990). Particularly serious differences among leaderships of different women's mosques have emerged over lavish receptions of returned pilgrims which at times degenerate into competition for status and public face at the expense of other mosque responsibilities.

The symbolic meanings of purity are subject to changing conceptions of the compatibility of Islam with modernising life-styles, particularly in urban areas. In Yunnan, an *ahong* from Northwest Muslim culture, thus inclined to more puritanical values, clashed with youths in his congregation when they refused to wear a head-dress, rejected as symbolising minority status and thus suggesting the anti-thesis of modernity. They insisted on studying the Koran in non-Muslim, thus modern, dress. He was defeated (September t996). When we visited a Muslim business woman who had been depicted in a publication published in Yunnan as serving customers in Islamic dress (Lin Yi, 1995), she reacted with displeasure to the false image such 'outmoded' strictures project; it had been pressed upon her by the photographer. She appears a proud, strong and wilful woman who does not need to wear a head-dress, she says, to express her purity of faith (interview, September 1996).

Shan *Ahong*: Equality and Purity

Shan *Ahong*, the second *ahong* at the Sifujie Women's Mosque in Qinyang City (Northwest of Zhengzhou), is 26 years old. She is the former *hailifan* of the older *ahong*, who is 67 years old. The Sifujie Mosque is a large, well-maintained mosque where between forty to fifty women worship on a regular basis; on *zhuma*, prayer-day, up to hundred women crowd the mosque.

Shan *Ahong* has had more schooling than most *ahong*, she graduated from

lower middle school, was then a *hailifan* for three years, receiving advanced instruction for two more years outside Qinyang, and was recalled by the mosque management committee, when she was in her early twenties and still unmarried, and a *hailifan*, to assist the older *ahong*.

She is relatively well educated in both secular and religious knowledge. She is as open to the need for change in the sphere of religious education for women as she is to social trends and the imperative of economic progress. Her faith moulds her personality: as she puts it, it has made her strong, determined, and where necessary forthright in her manner and speech. The way she chooses to express her faith outwardly is modelled on women's *hijab* in Arab Muslim countries.

Although Shan *Ahong* is from the *lao pai*, the traditionalist Sunni tradition, and thus brought up to wear the modest white cloth cap that women *ahong* wear, after a long and agonising period of deliberation, she chose to wear *gaitou* (a head-dress which covers all of her hair and neck down to her shoulders), something which is associated with the new or *yihewani* tradition (of purification of the faith). It brings her ridicule, she says, but her faith demanded this expression of complete submission to Allah's will. In this, her model is the 'Arab woman', closer to the source of faith as descendant of the Prophet. Although the *hijab* forms part of a dress code which is alien to her own environment; the moral code of appropriateness which equates internal qualities with outer appearance is also a part of Chinese native tradition which links interiority with external conduct. For Shan Ahong, to follow the faith is to become ever more like an Arab and less like a Chinese woman (conversations, November 1995).

Liang *Ahong*: Equality and Justice

Liang *Ahong* attended the 1987 (5th) National Congress of the China Islamic Association in Beijing as one of four women *ahong* members of the Congress. Her profile as an exemplary female *ahong* appeared in 1990 in the *Zhongguo Muselin* magazine of the China Islamic Association (Liu Xingmei, 1990:6). Born in the neighbourhood of the Niujie Mosque in Beijing, she accompanied her parents from early age to religious events. In 1930, at the age of fourteen, already then a precocious student of the Koran, she was accepted as a *hailifan* by Zhang Zhijun, female *ahong*. Not only a good student, but also a highly moral person, the article says, the young student then proceeded to immerse herself in the scriptures, following her teacher from Baoding to Jilin and back to Baoding. At the age of twenty, she graduated in the *chuanyi guazhang* ceremony to become an *ahong*.

Not only an outstanding *ahong*, Liang Ahong also did her duty as wife and mother. She married, bore four children, and always loyally served her congregation until she was driven from the mosque by the Cultural Revolution. It is not clear what happened to her during the ten or more years between the 1960s and 1970s. But she was recalled to Baoding Women's Mosque after 1978, at a time when religious sites were slowly returned to their communities, and she then embarked on a dedicated campaign to restore the badly damaged mosque to its former glory. In this, the writer remarks, she was carried by the support of the people and the government to which she would often refer with gratitude for the stable and peaceful environment in which Islam could now prosper. In her capacity as an *ahong* who enjoys official approval, she received foreign Muslim delegations and, according to the account, impressed everyone with her dedication to duty. She also helped to stabilise a potentially difficult situation when Muslims all over China protested in 1989 at the publication of a book considered offensive to Islam, *Xing Fengsu* (Sexual Customs). She was decisive in defusing tension and subsequently received the leaders' commendations for her role as peacemaker. The article praises Liang *Ahong* as steadfast, persevering, loyal to Party and Government, a good mediator between Muslim people and the authorities.

Shifting Identity

Whenever Du *Ahong* from the independent Zhengzhou Beida Women's Mosque gets angry at the leadership of the neighbouring men's mosque, she becomes an outraged 'Chinese woman' *(zhongguo nuren)*, insisting on respect of her equality as a woman, uttering dismissive references to how 'backward' *(luohuode)* Arab women are – and that she is not an Arab woman. When she gives a homily on *zhuma* (prayer day) to her congregation of women, she talks about the origin of *xiuti* (shameful parts that must be covered up) as if women are responsible for all the evil in this world, and thus deserving of punishment and segregation (as expression of remoteness from the divine). In this context, the so-called backwardness of Arab women she so deplores in other situations, now represents the sinful state of the female sex whereby iVluslim sisters are intimately linked, across national boundaries, in deserved commonality of subordination. She discourses on Eve as an ancestress who is *lihai* (formidable) in her powers. Yet this term carries connotations of both negative and positive qualities. When Du *Ahong* accepts for herself the designation of *lihai nuren* (a formidable woman), she also plays on the resonance of power. When women resort to strategies which acknowledge the rules of political games only to subvert their reason for

existence, then seemingly unalterable realities, the very structures of constraint, political or organisational, become laden with the possibility of change and transformation.

And thus Du *Ahong* becomes for the observer a sign that allows for certain cautious interpretations of agency and social change. Meanings signalled in one context are subject to transmutations when called for by another configuration of interests and power politics. A white soft hat (the head-cover customarily worn by the *gedimu pai*) which Du *Ahong* used to wear has given way to the *gaitou*: a message of manifold intentions, directed at different audiences, open to differing interpretations. The change in head-dress occurred after the second pilgrimage in 1996, and it reflects on reinvigorated spirituality. At the same time, the very fact that a politically astute *ahong* would be making this choice also indicates a shift in official attitude to religious assertiveness. It is assertiveness which writes on the body, thus apparently in keeping with official boundaries that delineate private right of religious expression and public policy of defence of a secular worldview. But it surreptitiously also informs the site of the *ahong's* activity, the women's mosque and its congregation, with a militant spirit. And imperceptibly changes are taking place where bodily, private, assertions of faith serve also as an assault on contested male claims to spiritual superiority. The *ahong*'s dress becomes significant as a challenge to the leadership of the men's mosque with whom the women have been locked into a drawn-out history of competitiveness. Dress which is thus worn as a sign of Islamic faith and of *haji* status has also become a source of provocation and contention in debates with male *ahong* over appropriateness of such appearance in an *ahong* from the *gedimu pai*. It is questions such as these, questions which arise from the linkage of the body individual and social, which are to be the subject of a more detailed map of women's religious culture in the next chapter in order to start exploring the elusiveness of the 'borderland between subjectivity and the symbolic order, agency and social control, experience and representation' (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1994:708).

Chapter IX

Xiuti; 'From Head to Toe' – Shaming and Concealing the Body

> A man without a wife, a home without a mistress
> A woman without a husband, a body without a master' (Arab proverb, cited by Na Guangyong, 1995:14).

Dress as Language and *Gestalt*

Although Islamic dress in the context of Chinese society is more subtly nuanced and sparingly expressed than religious dress-codes in many Muslim diasporas elsewhere (for example, F. Mubarak on Australian Muslim women, 1996), and in urban areas barely visible (Pang, 1997), nevertheless these minimal and subtle, but dynamic, expressions carry rich symbolic meanings too important to ignore. The Islamic head-dress, such as scarf, veil/head-dress, or round cap (*miansha, gaitou*, *maozi*), more than any other garment most strikingly differentiates Muslim women from other women in Chinese society; less immediately obvious, yet equally important, is the concept of modest dress, embracing also concealment of arms, legs, and ankles. For men the most visible symbol of Islamic identity is the round soft hat, flat at the top, or in the hexangular shape. While such dress is more prominent in concentrated Muslim communities in Northwest China and small enclaves in North, Central and Southwest China, its continually evolving and regionally diverse language carries meaning far beyond cover for the head and the body. Moreover, it constitutes a dynamic discourse on 'category creation … as an act of power' (Lindisfarne-Tapper & Ingham, 1997:17) by which the body becomes a site of display of political (state or collective) appropriation, or of its limitation.

Alison Lurie points to the richness of metaphor that is uncovered in the language of clothes when she says: 'Besides containing "words" that are taboo, the language of clothes, like speech, also includes modern and ancient words, words of native and foreign origin, dialect words, colloquialisms, slang and

vulgaries' (quoted in Lindisfarne-Tapper & Ingham, 1997:2). In exploring the language of dress it is possible to discover collective and personal appropriations of a fertile site of symbolic and cultural meanings and of multiple representations of religious, ethnic, gender, and regional identity by which the wearer is marked as an insider, or as belonging outside dominant identity demarcations (Barnes & Eicher, 1992; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1994). Although the dearth of studies in Chinese Muslim contexts and the difficulties of conducting such investigations in scattered diverse environments does not allow for exhaustive and comprehensive exploration, we suggest a beginning of possible readings from aspects of what Donn Welton (1998) calls the 'constitutional matrices' essential to bodily life.

In treating 'dress' as a '*gestalt,*' we were influenced by Eicher's and Roach-Higgins' formulation of dress as all-inclusive (including odour, skin, attachments, skeletal modifications, supplements; 1992:13) and as constructed socio-culturally. '…as an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings' (1992:15; also see readings in Roach-Higgins, Eicher & Johnson, 1995). Understanding dress as *gestalt* is the more appropriate for its application in Chinese indigenous culture in which social interconnectedness (known as the concept of *guanxi*) signifies the interplay 'between the sociomoral and the physical (the somatomoral)' (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1994:713).

By conceptualising dress as relational, the Chinese Islamic variations on the theme of *hijab* are considered in terms of a pertinent, culture-specific Chinese Islamic concept, *xiuti* (shameful parts of the body requiring concealment). The concept of *hijab* used here is based on Fatima Mernissi's writing. She understands *hijab* as a three-dimensional concept, embracing the visual, as concealment from view; the spatial, as a threshold dividing public and private space; and ethical, namely that which is prohibited at the level of ideas (1996:49–50). When we situate the concept of *hijab* in a Chinese discourse, women's concerns are seen to revolve around identification and appropriate concealment of those parts of the body which engender shame and remorse in relation to God, constituting a continuous re-enactment of the fall of Adam and Eve in paradise. In this patriarchal version of sacred history the gendered body has become the site of memory prompting: telling of the perfection of God's creation, rebellion and sin, punishment of Adam and Eve, sex-specific tribulations and the possibility of salvation through penitence.

An ethno-religious history of Islamic dress in China is outlined briefly in this Chapter, to be preceded by a contextualisation through some of the issues raised in international debates on the symbolism of *hijab*. Having introduced in earlier

chapters sources of patriarchal gender definition from the formative era of seminal deliberations on the nature of good and evil, of man and woman, by scholars such as Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi and Ma Zhu (see Chapter II), we foreground here another, and equally important source, the most popular myths on the origin of gendered sinfulness and remorse, on essentialised notions of women as less spiritual and as more needful of concealment than men. Within this cultural tradition of women's twin submission of soul and body to God and to man, defined and ritualised in the concept of *xiuti*, we trace some of the conversations taking place among Muslim women and men, preachers and ordinary believers, around the relationship between quality of internal religious commitment and Islamic dress, especially female dress, in a secular or modern environment, and of related implications for orthodox ideas concerning women's spirituality, beauty, and sexuality. Finally, the discussion shifts to how women themselves begin to reappraise 'shame' as traditionally connotative exclusively of female burden. In the current social climate of urban China and women's (including Muslim women's) changing sense of self and growing self-determination, it can be argued that potentially far-reaching redefinitions of the religious and social implications of *xiuti* are taking place whereby women begin to separate non-negotiable affliction, ordained by God (in consequence of Eve's transgression and women's legacy of sin as daughters of Eve), from negotiable, because earthly (patriarchal), afflictions.

The Symbolism of Veiling

In its powerful symbolism of interconnected phenomena of Islam, Islamic law and status of women, the most central religious female garment, the veil, has come to represent and frame, 'an apparently coherent subject', Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham (1997:12–13) argue. They continue: 'The rhetorical power of the imagery of the veil lies in its vacuity: everything depends on who is describing the phenomena of veiling, for whom and to what end' (Ibid: 14). The *hijab* which enshrouds Muslim women in the form of the *chador* and the veil, more or less restrictive, more or less voluntary, has become a site of international discourse in which nationalists, feminists, theologians and aesthetes participate with equal vigour. The *hijab*-enveloped female body has functioned in different times and different contexts as the bearer of specific, and shifting, symbolic and social inscriptions. Colonialism, liberation struggles, modernisation and westernisation, fundamentalism and secularism have used women's bodies as primary sites whereby to express a dynamic process of national and communal rites of self-definition (Afshar, 1993; Ahmed, 1982; Hatem, 1993; Helie-

Lucas,1993; Al-Hibri,1982; Kandiyoti, 1991; Mernissi, 1991, 1996; Moghadam, 1994; Sabbah,1984; Mubarak, 1996).

The implications for such symbolic uses of women are drawn out by Richard Antoun in relation to Egyptian Islamic resurgence and its impact on veiling. '[Fadwa] El Guindi notes that a woman cannot wear any mode of dress without expression of the behavioral correlates of commitment'. Terms of address differentiate among different degrees of modesty, 'the religious one' (*mutadayyina*) wears scarf and head-dress; 'the covered or sheltered one' (*mutahajjiba*) covers herself with the exception of the face; 'the veiled one' (*mutanaqqaba*) is completely covered, even her face is shrouded in an opaque veil (Antoun, 1989:243).

In Lila Abu-Lughod's interpretation, veiling as part of a code of deference (*hasham*) to a hierarchical, patricentered social order is understood as 'voluntary and situational' (1988:159). In the Egyptian Muslim Bedouin society which Abu-Lughod studies, she finds that women veil in relation to certain categories of men. She maintains that while the vocabulary might be that of sexuality or chastity, its veiling is a part of women's vocabulary in a highly gendered language of modesty. The sexuality which ties women to nature/lawlessness/chaos (through menstruation, menarche, menopause) and which threatens the social order embodied in a patricentered society, is covered up through the veil in a symbolic act of detachment from which women seek to derive respect for themselves, and through which they give social respect to those males with whom they identify. The concealment of 'sexual shame' is done therefore in certain situations (in relation to men socially superior to their men or kin) and voluntary. Thus it is not the denial of seduction but suppression of sexuality that is seen as dishonouring and undermining to society.

Different from Abu-Lughod who reads veiling as a path to honour for women, Fatnah Sabbah's analysis (1984) makes veiling 'the denial of the economic dimension of women, who, according to the tenets of Muslim orthodoxy, are exclusively sexual beings' (1984:13). Extending this line of argument yet further, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi maintains that 'Female modesty has a wider symbolic function: it refers to the need for the believer to curb his initiative and critical judgement' (1996:113; also see Chapter II.2).

While the Koran (*Sura* 33:59; 24:31) gives general guidelines about ensuring the safety and protection of women through modest attire and a husband's sole right to his wife's sexuality, when it comes to the question of degree of concealment, different views and opinions reflect on the origins of these guidelines, their universal application, and the severity of its implementation. Most importantly, all the models for the different schools of interpretation,

according to Ghassan Ascha, come from Hadiths about women in Medina during the Prophet's life, and about the Prophet's wives in particular. The system of veiling can be traced back to a Hadith ascribed to Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet, in which the Prophet forbade any physical contact between a man and a woman not married, and the whole female body came under cover (Ascha, 1995:96). Jane Smith maintains that the Prophet's seclusion of his wives was necessitated by insecure surroundings which subsequently was extended by others, less reform-minded than the Prophet, to become a sacred tradition (Smith, 1985:30).

The *hijab* descended, so Fatima Mernissi comments in an earlier work, in a year of political and military difficulties for the Prophet, himself an enlightened thinker and progressive reformer, who eventually was forced to submit to virulent opposition which arose to his proposed incursions into pre-Islamic patriarchal privileges. But the Prophet's personal act, on a long night of wedding celebrations, of drawing a cloth curtain to keep his companion, Anas, out of the bridal chamber, was no less significant for its forceful demonstration by one man towards another man of the rightful privilege of exclusive proprietorship over women in his sphere of power. What took place is construed by many imams to have been devised as a spiritual weapon for the benefit and protection of women, whereas more critical feminist voices see the Prophet's surrender to segregationist pressures as having helped cement the foundation for a symbolic universe structured by the hierarchy of gender (Mernissi, 1991:85–101; Sabbah, 1984).

Thus whatever the Prophet's liberated message or progressive readings of Koranic passages might have yielded, normative Islam and orthopraxy, as it came to evolve over the centuries, are poles apart. As Riffat Hassan notes in her discussion of the effect of Islam on sexuality, it may have been positive in its overall impact, but it was most liberating when it came to free male sexuality as a 'divine instrument' for the advantage of a patrilineal and patriarchal society. Female sexuality remained, and remains, circumscribed (Hassan, 1991:96–97).

Already this short overview of some of the literature on readings of the *hijab* cautions us to take note of its multiple meanings and diverse interpretations, its cultural and political conditioning and sensitive function as metaphorical marker of collective and personal, national and global, ethnic and modern identity. The context of interpretation for Chinese Muslim displays of dress by which not only identity, modernity, and gender relations, but also commonalities and enduring differences with the host society were defined, has depended on Hui representations and recoveries of the past in scholarly writings and the rich literature of local histories (most often initiated and guided by local China

Islamic Associations). Only thus could we begin to interpret the language of clothing 'through a local lens' (Lindisfarne-Tapper & Ingham, 1997:11).

Dress, Gender and Ethno-Religious History

Nearly all local chronicles of Hui history (*difangzhi* or *wenshi ziliao*; see Appendix IV) address also the history of Hui appearance and clothing; from distinctive differences which once made their Muslim forebears stand out from members of the host society, symbolic of pride in their Arabic or Persian origin, and in their status in Chinese society, prior to the 'time of adversity' and assimilative policies during the Ming Dynasty (see Chapter III), to a levelling of physical and cultural features. The subtext for such readings is the significance of a host society's tolerance of diversity which enabled the early flourishing of Muslim religious culture in China. The loss of cultural autonomy through the imperial policies of cultural and political repression suffered by the Hui people since the Ming Dynasty is often told in the waning of a distinctive language of dress. For example, in the history of the Hui people of Huhehot, Inner Mongolia, a policy of 'utmost prohibition and of change' of an accustomed way of life and dress under Ming imperial rule led to a re-fashioning of members of the Hui community into a marginal minority, threatened with cultural extinction. 'But Hui people most certainly did not simply because of prohibitions on the part of the ruling class, totally surrender and change over to Han dress. Instead they upheld and preserved those rather salient [aspects of] traditional dress which carry Islamic and ethnic characteristics' (*Huhehote Shi Huizu Shi*, 1994:289). According to the authors, the material underpinning of Islamic identity then evolved in cross-fertilisation with surrounding cultures into what is worn until today as a 'characteristic' Hui dress, either put on for specific ritual occasions or, in closed Muslim communities, more commonly for everyday use.

Thus the dress code in Hui Muslim communities in Northwest China testifies to an unbroken, even resurgent, ethnic consciousness (*minzu yishi*) of a fostered separate identity, with the historical relationship between Islamic religion and Hui*zu* ethnicity evolving into more ambiguous, and contested, constellations elsewhere in China (Gladney, 1991). Interviews with cadres and believers in Linxia Town, Ningxia, where Hui constitute over 50 per cent of the population, and observations of street life emphasise the indispensable role played by Islamic dress in expressing ethnic identity (*minzu shenfen*) and, by definition, religious membership (*zongjiao shenfen*) with little or no bearing on indications of 'backward' or 'anti-modern' values (Interviews, September 1995, in Linxia). In the Muslim settlements in Ningxia and Gansu, men's cap and women's head-

dress denote a dual membership of Hui*zu*, Sala*zu*, Donganz*u*, or Bao*zu* ethnic group-identity, and of Muslim faith. To belong to one of the minorities designated as Islamic and not wear such a dress is to be, or at least appear to be, Han. To be a Muslim and not wear appropriate dress is to commit an affront to faith and assault on the community of believers. By the same token it is a given that a woman or a man such attired would be a believer of Islam. One identity entails the other. The same observation applies to the small Hui settlements or town-quarters elsewhere in China where the dress-code however is used more flexibly, adhered to when inside the community, altered when leaving it and re-entering Han society. Where, as in Central and South China, Muslim populations are scattered, the gate or threshold of a mosque becomes the site of transformation in which appearance and inner realities are reconciled and wrenched apart. Like the outer appearance of many Chinese mosques in Central and South China which often resemble Confucian lineage halls rather than Islamic sites of worship, and only in their interior reveal the true designation, so Chinese Muslim conceal under a Han exterior the inner life fuelled by faith (quoting Ma *Ahong*, Qinyang mosque, Henan Province, interview May 1996).

But in many interviews we discovered different emphases in the way men and women express identity through dress. Women, in Muslim communities also elsewhere in China, tend to situate their Islamic dress much more in a context of international Islam whereby, dressed as the ideal 'Arab woman' (reference is to head-dress and modest clothing), they join Muslim women 'all over the world,' a recognition of the universal symbolism of *hijab* for Islamic faith. But this is no simple identification with the Islamic *umma* (through an identification with the homogenised Muslim/Arab woman), as Yang *Ahong* from Qinyang emphasises, Chinese Muslim women after all don modest clothing to 'dress for society' (*wei chumen*), rather than for a life spent indoors as, it is considered by Chinese women, all 'Arab Muslim' women are forced to do (Interviews, April 1996; see Chapter VIII on constructs of 'the Arab woman'). On numerous occasions, the presence of a foreign woman would give rise to invitations to join the congregation in a women's mosque, after Friday worship, to answer questions on Muslim life in Western countries. As Ma *Ahong* from Kaifeng reminded her small group of women worshippers, they must never forget that they are a part of Islam which is ever more strong and internationally influential (May, November 1996).

Local Hui history publications, whilst giving only somewhat cursory treatment to the history (and demise) of Hui dress, are effusive in the details of the contemporary Islamic dress code. Seemingly minor dress articles are itemised with great care: accessories, head coverings, colours, often barely

discernible to an outside observer, are revealed to symbolise intricate Islamic and ethnic significations on gender, age and marital status (particularly concerning women's positions within the female life-cycle), regional customs, and religious (professional) status.

Islamic dress codes create distinctly gendered bodies. Cross-gender dressing is a violation explicitly condemned. Men are warned not to compromise their masculine nature with adornments of gold and silk, which are classified as feminine. By the same token, women must not turn themselves against their nature, God-ordained, by imitating men in dress and conduct. Both sexes are forbidden any kind of artificial intervention, such as cosmetic surgery and wearing of a wig, all which are seen as detrimental to Muslim morality and well-being. Men and women are exhorted to dress chastely, simply and in obedience to God's arrangement for an orderly family-centred society in which gender definitions and roles are clearly articulated and sanctioned by the social institutions of marriage and mosque.

The history of the Hui in Huhehot City (*Huhehote Shi Huizu Shi*, 1994:289–293) indicates that the most prominent symbol for men of Hui Muslim status is the soft white hat, unadorned or embroidered, distinguishing between worshipper and *ahong* or *hailifan*. The rest of the clothing is less obviously Islamic, although the wearing of a sleeveless jacket is ubiquitous. More prevalent in Northwest China and among the *yihewani pai* (reformist Sunni Muslim tradition) adherents elsewhere is attention to beard, for older men, and moustache, for younger men. As the authors remark, facial hair is favoured among men for conveying a sense of style and a weighty patriarchal air (Ibid: 291).

In contrast to men, women's dress codes provide more intricate and abundant readings. This contrasting gendered dress language, according to Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham (1997), suggests a more direct state control of men's dress and thus closer intervention in men's symbolic and social capacities. They propose that any dress code must be set in the context of an overall social system, thus 'it is much more likely that women's dress, by default or choice, signals identities which are forbidden or precluded to men' (1997:29). It is the secondary status of women which allows them to function as repositories of collective memory, yet their value to the collective is by the same symbolic token predicated on the maintenance of the sexual status quo. Furthermore defined by the 'natural' life-cycle biology is held to impose on women, each age and its proper social role are symbolised in outer dress. Chinese Muslim women's Islamic dress code is most prominently *gaitou* (head-dress) and a soft hat, sometimes worn together. The acknowledgement of God's imprint on

woman's body, in the shameful parts, *xiuti* (hair, ears, neck), through their strict concealment, is the most salient expression of *yimani* (faith). In Huhehot, Inner Mongolia, young, unmarried girls wear green-coloured *gaitou*, expressive of purity, beauty, vitality, and the sacred Islamic colour associated with spring and vigour. Golden embroidered border-designs lend individual wearers an air of cautious individuality and fashion. Young Muslim girls in Ningxia wear red or green or white kerchiefs in winter, and in summer change over to red, green, or yellow thin gauze kerchiefs (Ding Guoyong, 1993).

The white material chosen by married, middle-aged, women signals the shift in beauty to reside in the qualities of cleanliness, chastity and prudence. The colour white, one of the significant colours in Islam, is imbued with a special meaning traced back to Arab cultural ancestry and Islamic symbolism, which carry connotations of nobility and purity (see Ma & Lai, 1995, for relevant discussion), overlaid by Confucian symbolism of purity. In Ningxia, middle-aged married women may also be seen wearing round hats of different materials and intricate border-designs (Ding Guoyong, 1993). Describing how Muslim women in Yunnan manifest their religiosity (through wearing a white hat or a longer head-dress, *gaitou*), Lin Yi (1995) points out that the colour white, as a symbol of pure faith, is synonymous with the faith of the Hui people. Older women in Yunnan wear the white hat throughout the year, younger women put on a scarf or head-dress when they worship at the mosque, on the occasion of Ramadan, the Feast of Sacrifice, or on Saint-Day.

Old women enshroud their heads with black cloth, longer than is usual for younger women, suggestive of self-abnegation, a simplicity of life-style and sobriety suitable for those nearing the end of their mortal existence. Ordinarily, the cloth is plain but of superior quality (Lin Yi, 1995:32) Black, another principal Islamic colour, denotes solemnity and elegance. In winter, old women in Ningxia in the Northwest cover their heads with a black or dark headscarf, in summer these are replaced by a white gauze kerchief (Ding Guoyong, 1993).

No distinctive dress is worn, but its cut, length, and material must adhere to Islamic stipulations to protect the pious woman from the 'greedy' male gaze. In several interviews with Muslim women the equation of piety with protection of piety, that is, control of men's 'natural instincts' of 'sexual greed' made the *hijab* as a concept of gender relations non-negotiable (prominent member of Chinese Muslim community in Hong Kong, interview July 1996; Henan women Muslim, interviews October 1996, March, April, May 1997).

Earrings and bracelets are allowed. Local customs as in Muslim communities in Inner Mongolia hold that a dutiful daughter-in-law ought to wear a bracelet to symbolise her respect for her elders. The bracelet alerts the wearer that she must

not neglect to wait upon her mother-in-law (*Huhehote Shi Huizu Shi*, 1994:293). Young women *kailian* (clean the face) with the help of older women who remove unwanted facial hairs to prettify the young girl. In reference to Arab custom, young girls also may be seen to use henna (*haina*) to dye the palms of their hands (account from *Huhehote Shi Huizu Shi*, 1994:289–293).

Regional variations in definitions of Islamic dress code take note of environmental cultural influences, Han or minority cultures, or rural conservatism and urban city modernity. In mountainous areas in Ningxia Hui women wear embroidered shoes and are furthermore distinguished by their love of ornamental earrings. But urban female youths can be seen without head-dress, showing off long hair and fashionable dress. Thus, the account of Ningxia Hui-dress concludes, traditional clothing is a feature predominantly in the countryside and in urban Muslim areas among old women and men (Ding Guoyong, 1993:286–287).

In their anthropological investigation of *xingbie huibi zhidu* (system of sexual segregation) in Northwest Muslim communities, the authors Ma Ping and Lai Cunli (1995) emphasise the need to recognise the mutually reinforcing structures of social systems that construct and segregate gender: spatial arrangement of domestic habitation, separation from outsider males, expressed in the saying among rural Muslims that ‘married women do not mix with strange men’ (*jiafu bu jian wainan*), and the strict enforcement of the Islamic dress code which makes the wearing of *gaitou* ubiquitous among not only Dongxiang*zu*, Sala*zu*, but also Hui Muslim women (Ma & Lai, 1995:127). Underlying all these social arrangements is the taboo on free association between women and men, with the exception of relations with a spouse. The structural constraints in closed, self-contained Muslim communities makes the confinement to segregated public and domestic spheres, circumscribed social intercourse with men, an equation in which the social restrictions are written across the physical and bodily presence of women; the religious *hijab* is a faithful re-enactment on the female body of the code excluding women from social and religious authority.

Myths of origin and shame

All women’s stories start here: with Eve and Adam in paradise. In Chinese Muslim society, as elsewhere, different versions of the Fall and of Eve’s role in the Fall, of her share of guilt and the nature of punishment, are circulated in mosques and told and retold in popular tradition. This is different from fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran in which, as a contradistinction with Christian tradition of the legacy of the Fall from paradise for all of humanity,

damnation is reserved for Satan as the origin of sin (see the Pakistani scholar Fazhur Rahman, 1980). Of central influence is the version related in the *Qingzhen Yuzhu* (Book Two: 78–79) which forms part of the traditional body of knowledge and is transmitted as a reliable historical source by women *ahong* and literate believers.

By providing a religio-historical context for the ritual taboos which apply to menstruating and childbearing women, readers are informed that 'the origin of women's pregnancy and menstruation is: when the ancestress of mankind, Haowa (Eve), was in paradise and began to eat the forbidden fruit, Anla (Allah) thereupon employed this calamity (such as menstruation) to try her (*kaoyan*), afterwards it befell her daughters' bodies as an inexorable fate [which will last] until the Day of Judgement. Because all of this has come about due to human beings' failure to follow Allah's words and adhere to His commandments, He must resort to such [infliction of] calamity in order to try them' (*Qingzhen Yuzhu*, Two:78–79).

Tales popular among Hui Muslims take up the presumed guilt of Eve and elaborate on the salient features of female nature and its consequences for those desirous to repent. Because Adam was seduced by Eve to eat the forbidden fruit after her prior act of sin, God's intervention caught him early in the act. *Ahong* like to account for men's tell-tale 'Adam's apple' as a sure sign of Adam's late participation in the Fall. The forbidden fruit, barely tasted, only half-swallowed, thus stuck in Adam's throat, as an enduring legacy of God's punishment, and for all to see. However, Eve's sin had contaminated more deeply, seeping into the lower part of her body where the apple was already being digested. God in consequence inflicted the painful calamity of monthly menstruation and painful childbearing. Whereas the sons of Adam must cover their nakedness 'from navel to knee', women must cover themselves 'from head to toe' (if they are free women) and 'from neck to feet' (if they are unfree women or servants) (*Qingzhen Yuzhu*, Two:13). Unequivocally, women's shame and guilt is greater, her punishment remorseless, recurrent, and inescapable. The most progressive woman *ahong* can be heard to expound on the principle that female nature is flawed, '*nuren dou huai*' (women are bad).

Whereas men's bodies are *xiuti* only in part, all of women's bodies has been polluted by the sinful act of Eve. In the case of men, their site of disgrace is more easily concealed and does not interfere with their movement and physical mobility. In contrast, women are defined by the shame of their sex which requires nearly total concealment. But this shame is relative and situational, relevant to the sphere which men inhabit, the public context. Women can be released from this confinement if and when they are ready to submit to their

husband. In this submission, a body in need of concealment is unconcealed; a body ugly and offensive because tainted by violation of God's laws is transformed to appeal and pleasure; a sexuality ever threatening public order turns into a site of God-created fertility and a source of pleasure for men. Whereas men's submission to God lies in the responsibility for, and power over, women, Sabbah says in her analysis of gender hierarchy in Islamic orthodoxy (1984), women's submission to God lies in their act of submission to men.

More insight into popular elaborations on proper treatments of female bodies are afforded by tales and legends told among Hui Muslims, such as the following story from Henanese Muslim culture, in which we hear of a woman whose beauty is conditional on her invisibility to the public (male) gaze. An old man offers his daughter to the young protagonist as a reward for his honesty. 'I have an only daughter, she is blind and dumb. She has no hair nor feet. You will have my permission if you agree to take her as your wife'. The young man, initially horrified by visions of her ugliness, agrees reluctantly to a marriage. On their wedding night when the bride removes her veil, she is revealed to him as beautiful. The veil functions as a symbol which reveals a bi-cultural influence that has become mutually reinforcing: that is, as a bridal veil of a Confucian texture under which terms women were transferred to the family of their husbands, and as a veil signifying the Islamic *hijab* which entitles only the husband to legitimate intimate revelation of the woman's adornments. The bride explains to her gratified young husband that to her father '…I am blind because I have never seen evil things; I am dumb because I have never been to improper places; I have no hair because I have never shown my face in public' (Li Shujiang & Luckert, 1994:337–339). Only when a woman is wedded to a man who can claim rightful possession of her body is the act of unveiling, because for her rightful master, given the proper aura of innocence.

The young woman's proper conduct, so the tale moralises, has laid the foundation for the ideal man-wife relationship. Furthermore, a society is projected in which social space is identified as segregated into feminised and masculinised spheres, each inhabited by the appropriate sex. Yet it is not mutually exclusive. Women unfold themselves in their beauty to husbands who straddle both worlds, opening and shutting the gates to signal overarching freedom of association or personal (male) territory. But for women, societal attributes of beauty and virtue are predicated on their exclusion of the world beyond the courtyard, on their very ignorance of public matters.

Hui mythology is a guide to the different symbolic maps which structure female and male gender. The different degrees to which Eve and Adam were implicated in the eating of the forbidden fruit can be read from the zones of pain

and discomfort which invade and carve into the bodies of their descendants. Men and women, forever condemned to re-enact their gendered legacies in strictly ordained 'redemptive ceremonial measures' would be henceforth 'doing their prayers, by kneeling and squatting respectively. Ice-cold knees and buttocks are constant reminders of the people's proper roles during life on earth. These posture-specific afflictions of males and females *define their relationship and behavior toward one another and, in prayer, toward Allah*' (Li Shujiang & Luckert, 1994:20; italics are mine).

Li and Luckert present in their collection of Hui Muslim tales three versions of Hui genesis. The first version tells of angelic ancestors. Their sexuality is traced back to their heavenly origin as male and female angels as well as to the consumption of forbidden fruit – which instils hunger and sensuality in addition to furnishing Adam and Eve with prominent sexual characteristics. Adam and Eve eat differently, slip (on an earth still frozen) differently, and thus find themselves with contrasting markings on their body: (his) cold knees and (her) cold buttocks (1994:73–77; Ningxia tale). In the second version, Eve is created out of Adam's rib. Her role as the devil's ready victim, her persuasive power over Adam and his downfall, are the dramatic motor of the version. Eve's consequent punishment is a direct consequence of folly and greed, her belly cursed with menses. Adding to her pain are the cold buttocks which result from her sexual joining with Adam on a frozen river. All those parts of the body, the story points out, which had a share in the committing of sin by contact with the forbidden tree and fruit (face, forehead, hand, feet) have to be cleansed in the ritual ablutions that must precede prayers (1994:77–79). In the third version from Heilongjiang, Eve grows out of a lump on Adam's rib, and it is Adam who develops sexual passion for her different form. But she is so tantalised by her earthly desires that she cannot but succumb to temptation; she consumes the forbidden object and, moreover, drags Adam down with her. Again, it is Adam who gets caught, fruit still stuck in his throat he must admit to the sinful deed, and gets away with the mark of an Adam's apple. Eve's sinful state has spread to her lower part, and her punishment is seen to fit the crime, the curse of menses (1994:79–82).

While these tales in their different ways expound for both men and women on the same direct, divine causality between sin and bodily constitution which literally and metaphorically freezes posture into symbolic and essential submission to God, to what extent does kneeling as opposed to squatting, an Adam's apple as opposed to the infliction of menses and childbirth, suggest gendered chains of causality? For example, how is the causality to be treated between God's design of Eve and spiritual deficiency of all women? Between

women's mark of 'shame' and its proper concealment? Between concealment and submission to God? Between concealment and women's sense of (spiritual) self-worth as contrasted with that of men?

Which are the implications of scriptural interpretations, Hadiths and popular tales for women's nature? How are women seen to have been created by God through the instrument of Eve's flawed character? Women's inheritance of Eve's moral frailty and her instrumental role in weakening Adam's, and thus all men's claim to salvation, has frozen women into an essentialised category of 'woman': unable to reach God and fulfilment of positive potential by herself. Her salient mark, both symbolic of women's ineradicable flaw, the mortal sin, and of an ineradicable attribute of feminine virtue, is submissiveness. Whereas Andean people recreate in their dress their ancestral origin and identity (Penny Dransart speaks of beliefs whereby ancestors come into the world 'wearing the dress which identified the sex and the ethnic origin of the wearer'; Dransart, 1992:145), the importance placed on Islamic appearance and thus mark of shame it must cover is a constant reminder of the ancestry, and legacy, which women must negotiate. Ideology of 'origin' freezes biology into a site of static femininity which becomes in Kristeva's language (1993) the 'boundary subject' of gender, ethnic and religious stasis.

The Female Body tied to Earth and Shame: Spirituality

Women must be submissive because they cannot leave the temptations of this earth, and all it stands for, by their own strength. In Chinese Muslim culture, women are symbolic of attachment to the earth and its transitory pleasures, their bodies are marked by painful afflictions which stand in the way of attainment of spirituality, such as menstruation and childbearing and sexual nature, a source of displeasure to God and of temptation to man.

In 'The Islamic Tales of Moral Exhortation from the Scriptures' which *ahong* convey to their congregations in sermons and religious instruction (*Ahong Zhishi Bidu*, n.d.), a much-cited tale of the Prophet Mohammed recounts his unshakeable *jiaomen* (religious faith) in the face of obstructive temptations. While travelling along the road, the Prophet was accosted on three occasions by three different voices, calling out to him. What turned out to be the voice of a Jew sought vainly to draw the Prophet to the Jewish faith; what turned out to be the voice of a Christian, vainly sought his conversion to Christianity. The third voice was female. Young and richly adorned, she sought to halt him in his progress, but he did not turn around. Afterwards, Zhibaileyilai (Gabriel) enlightened the Prophet that this young female was *dunya*, representing *jinsheng*

(literally, this life) and the loss of *houshi* (eternal life with God; n.d.:53; see Chapter II). The Prophet emerged from these temptations victoriously.

Various women informants brought this tale from 'The Islamic Tales of Moral Exhortation from the Scriptures' to our attention. Guo *Ahong* while talking about the flawedness of women invoked the name of *dunya* as symbolic of women's weddedness to this world with its many aberrations and deviations from the path to salvation. In the tale, secular attachment personified by woman is an obstacle on the path of men's attainment of the good. In the shape of a young male of elegant air the Prophet finally encounters *jiaomen*, the true faith, which will facilitate his entry into paradise (Ibid: 53–54). When mainly souls of female shape convulse in hell (see Chapter X), the relentless logic of sin and damnation for Eve's descendants makes them the very site of hellish gestation. Whereas Muslim men are wont to justify treatment of women's demands in reference to *dunya* as temptress and emblem of this-worldly preoccupations, women react more ambivalently and critically. Whereas some women see their deepest anxiety over the fate of their soul reinforced by such Hadith, others point angrily to the tale as an illustration of male authorship and manipulation.

The administrator of an independent women's mosque in Zhengzhou, Henan, criticised what she called 'the feudal attitude' towards women expressed in the compilation and dissemination of such traditions by men. She differentiates clearly between the core values of Islam and what she calls the 'feudal oldies' (*fengjiande laotou*) among male elite of imams and administrators who preside over men's mosques and, less so, over the China Islamic Association. Less so because, however reluctantly, the latter must at least hold themselves accountable to the principle of sexual equality which, she frequently affirms, governs modernising Chinese society. Her voice is influential in the women's community of urban Muslim women and finds positive resonance among many women. Such voices bring the important reminder that while religious praxis still privileges essentialised notions of women, these are also not uncontested. This vocal critic of the *dunya* legend is particularly severe in her utterances because those imams, she says, most likely to exploit such tales are 'hostile to women, particularly to women *ahong*'. She is most conscious of authorship of such constructs of gender and steadfastly refuses to see anything but 'feudalistic' machinations on the part of anti-women's mosque movement patriarchs.

Du *Abong's* reply to this traditional tale is the presentation of a contrastive tale which speaks of a woman of unshakeable faith and dutiful submission as a Muslim. Du *Ahong* says that both types of women must be acknowledged. In this tale from a women's mosque, the female protagonist had such piety that the duty of worship outranked everything else she had to do. On many occasions, a

seductive voice (the devil) whispered to her to remember her duties as a wife and mother and the joys of worldly pleasure, but she stood firm. When her husband came home one evening, he was enraged to find her still at worship and no food on the table. He poured boiling water over her to kill her, but he did not succeed even in burning her skin. Her faith made her immune to pain and physical scars. Du *Ahong* finished the story with the reference to women's high spirituality, 'one pure woman surpasses one-thousand pure men' (*yige qingliangde nuren shengguo yiqian qingliangde nanren*, using a version popular among women).

What is remarkable about his tale is not only that it counters popular constructions of female spiritual indifference, but that it celebrates neglect of domestic chores. And in doing so women become poor wives and good Muslims! This tale thus acknowledges the central contradiction which exists between God and marriage institution and the possibility of its transcendence through women falling in with God's will, rather than falling victim to the recalcitrance of family patriarchs. Marriage is not quite the 'death' and 'foreclosure' of John Borneman's analysis (1996), nor does marriage always entail the painful rupture which separates within a woman's inexorable life-cycle hope from its disenchantment.

Beauty

Discussing the specific nature of Islamic memory, Fatima Mernissi asks why women as *jariya*, slaves, play such a prominent role, and she concludes that the concept of 'appeal, beauty, and submissiveness' is most completely embodied in women situated in unequal relationships. She finds that 'there is an intimate connection between what is regarded as beautiful and the prevailing political relations of force' (1996:86). Powerlessness and beauty are thus intimately linked. The Islamic ideal of female beauty is central to Muslim faith. Submission is not only a female but also a male ideal as it characterises female beauty along with the essence of Muslim submission. In this coupling of beauty with surrender, Mernissi builds on the work of Fatna Sabbah (1984). Sabbah's framework links two dominant discourses in Islam: the legal discourse of constraint and discipline, and the erotic discourse, situated in the subversive realm of pleasure. Both discourses, intimately connected, inscribe themselves on the female body (1984:3–4). In asking how sexual and political worlds are linked to each other, Sabbah argues she must decode 'the messages inscribed on the female body by Islam as a cultural system and as a code that distributes signs and values to beings and things according to its own specific hierarchy' (Ibid: 12).

The very notion of beauty in the cultural code of Chinese Islam, so the Hui tale of the ugly unknown woman and beautiful bride reveals, lies in the notion of concealment. In the encoding of concealed feminine beauty, and also in the act of her unveiling, the institution of marriage as a rite of a woman's maturation and fulfilment is born. In making restraint of women's uncontrollable passionate nature its underlying imperative, the Islamic order reveals the root cause of hierarchical discipline over the body of women: its fear of individualism. Individualism with its associations of anarchy and disobedience to central authority would spell the death of a cosmogony which in its very structure reveals divine ordering of creation of saints, angels, man, woman and nature. Both Mernissi and Sabbah suggest that the crucial role played by women to the preservation of a hierarchically ordered Islamic universe makes women's rights and veiling such contested areas of discourse.[1]

If beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, and the beholder possesses the power of definition (through praise of purity, chastity, and propriety) and affirmation (through promises of spiritual and secular rewards), the dismantling of a particular notion of beauty requires the kind of radical external intervention initiated by the Communist Party during its anti-religious feudalism campaigns of the 1950s (see Chapter VIII). Not only may this concept of beauty, however, be co-opted by women themselves, but also endure and be modernised through creative alterations: such as can be observed among young Muslim girls in Ningxia or Gansu Province whose imaginative draping of coloured scarves around spotless white hats speaks of fashion trends quite as dynamic as the language of falling and rising hem-lines in Western dress. Young female *hailifan* in women's mosques in Zhengzhou can be observed sewing on their head-dresses exquisite golden embroidered borders which compete with each other in intricacy of design. Eye-catching shawls, draped loosely around head and shoulders, are worn to carefully match the colour of a jacket or dress worn by the *hailifan* venturing forth from Huhehot *Nusi* on their rare outings into town.

A middle-aged Hui trader, sitting with us on a slow bus from Linxia to Xining (Qinghai), was pronouncing his views on the kind of wife his son was to look for: hard-working, pious, and modest in attire. A woman who does not conceal her hair (*bu dai gaitoude*) cannot be beautiful, he added. Upon further questioning, he explained that a veil, scarf, or a full headdress transforms even a woman with unwashed, or unkempt, hair (most women in his view) into a beauty. Very practical considerations as to the undoubted impact of a dry and dusty environment and of scarce water resources on hard-working women with little time to spend on appearance were thus in this interpretation protected not from lecherous, but from negative, male appraisal. Either way, women's need of

the concealment afforded by *hijab*, in its local variation, was thus justified in relation to their self-interest in an environment dominated still by patriarchal prerogative (conversation in September 1995).

Sexuality and Marriage

Why is the female body exempt from the great spiritualising project of orthodox Islamic discourse, Sabbah asks (1984:63–4). Whereas in her analysis, women are givers of life and pleasure in the physical, sexual discourse of Islam; in the sacred, orthodox discourse the creation of life is claimed as an exclusive attribute of divine power. 'In the Muslim universe there is no purely sexual field; there is only a regulated sexual field, coded and systematised according to the options and priorities of Islam as a culture and a strategy for civilisation' (1984:65).

Historians of traditional Chinese women's history (foremost Charlotte Furth) have argued that earlier notions of permissive sexual mores that also benefited women (based on the classic interpretation by Robert van Gulik) need rethinking. In her reappraisal of traditional Chinese medical treatises, Furth (1994) finds a preoccupation with physical and social control of sexuality, as refined by the cult of immortality and of generativity. 'Dominion over one's own body, the bodies of women, and the body politic came together for realised "true men", who used the method of sexual intercourse to attain longevity as lords and sages' (1994:131). This theme of 'fencing in' women in well-defended spatial and hierarchical segregated lines is also developed by Katherine Carlitz (1994) in her discussion of late-Ming literary discourse on women's bodies. Both men's and women's bodies are dedicated to service and a higher goal, but women's bodies are used in a way that speaks of their gender-specific usage.

Elisabeth Croll's work has taken the theme of 'dominion' over female bodies further into contemporary Chinese society and her interpretations suggest some intriguing questions about the interplay of patriarchal ideologies. Croll (1994; see also Chapter VIII for a different slant on Croll's thesis) advances the thesis that female-gendered notions of time and space may have contributed crucially to the failure of the Communist Party in China to make women Half of Heaven. The Heaven that was to be conquered and claimed by women as equal partners and beneficiaries of a sexually egalitarian society remained instead the unreconstructed *yang* space of patriarchal inscriptions. Women are as ever bound to the inexorable life-cycle that is the recurrent passage of Nature and Earth, caging them into a confined existence, unable to peer beyond the walls of domestic space. Thus defined by the womb-centeredness of traditional

prescriptions for female lives which weighs on their hopes and commitments, utopian visions of a Heaven in this world remain the sole domain of men. Heaven was never for women to ponder, and they are, as of old, at best guests in a foreign land. Could it be argued that Chinese cosmology and the 'sacred pyramidal order' which feminist Muslims scholars such as Fatna Sabbah argue is enshrining gender asymmetry in Islamic cosmology are complicit in their exclusion of women from Heaven, whether sacred or secular in construction?

Sabbah's thesis holds that God's existence is rooted in the existence of man, both needing to appropriate women's reproductive capacities to reproduce themselves. This appropriation structures the relationship between the two sexes which thus supports, symbolises and perpetuates the basic, pivotal relationship between God and his believer. The sacred discourse inscribes on the female body an appropriation of its productive and reproductive labour that is placed at the service of man. Created by a common source, the Muslim scholar R. Hassan writes, men and women are sexually interdependent. 'The creation and sexuality of one is, thus, inseparable from the creation and sexuality of the other' (Hassan, 1991:98). By providing a positive affirmation of male sexuality, female sexuality is circumscribed as constituent of the basic code of Islamic cosmology which codifies mankind's surrender to the divine and sanctions what Derrida has called 'the violent hierarchy' of rights and submission (quoted in Bornemann, 1996:219).

When John Bornemann writes about the need to rethink 'marriage as a privilege that operates through a series of foreclosures and abjections, through the creation of an outside' (1996:225), he assumes an absolutist hold over the conduct of men and women that creates an outside and inside. Indeed, marriage in Muslim culture functions as a central, sacred and sacrosanct, referent which is ignored only at one's peril. It is through the institution of the family that the natural satisfaction of sexual urges received a legitimate outlet, that gender relations are conducted in adherence to Islamic principle of ethical conduct, and that an ideal Muslim way of life is safeguarded and reproduced (see Chapter VI).

The Arab proverb cited at the beginning of the chapter – 'A man without a wife, a home without a mistress; A woman without a husband, a body without a master' – appears in a newspaper which is published by the Kunming (Yunnan Province) Islamic School for the Study of the Koran. Its readership consists of those who are, or will be, in positions of spiritual authority in the Yunnan Muslim community: such as *hailifan* (Koran students), teachers of the Koran, leading members of the community. Na Guangyong introduces the proverb with considerable approval because it illuminates, so he tells his readers, the only correct understanding of sexual equality in Islam, the larger theme in his article.

Na comments that this proverb helps to explain how men and women are indeed sexual equals and thus constitute '*huxiang yicunde'* (mutually interdependent) elements of the harmonious family as a cornerstone of God's creation (Na, 1995:14). A preceding passage adds to sexual equality and mutual interdependence a third feature: '*zhudao diwei*' (man as the *pater familias* of his household, a position denoting dominance, leadership and authority). Na quotes from the famous Koranic passage which gives men and women equality in rights and duties. However in relation to each other, men are placed 'one degree' above women. 'Women shall with justice have rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have a status above women' (Koran, 2:228). Na brings physiological and economic reasons, physiological weakness and dependency, for this structural asymmetry (Ibid: 13). The assertion that men and women are equal (*nan-nu pingdeng*) is the sine qua non of all discussions in China which touch upon the subject of women's status. It is 'the rhetorical glaze' (to borrow a suggestive phrase from Elisabeth Croll, 1994) which is also spread over the internal debate among Hui Muslims as to the rightful marital relationship of a Muslim couple at the same time as certain qualifications relating to interpretations of religious doctrines are inserted into the discussion.

Can it be said that Maoist egalitarian policies succeeded in shifting the primacy of wife and mother responsibilities for women, so strongly entrenched in Islam cosmology? Many conversations and articles in Muslim publications reveal how religious role models, such as the daughter of the Prophet, Fatima, or his wives, most prominently Aisha and his first wife, Khadiyah, serve to buttress diverse interpretations of equality befitting a Chinese Muslim context (see also Ascha, 1995). The Prophet's wives are seen as standing exemplary for all Muslim women in a popular booklet authored by the Egyptian scholar Aisha Akadu Laheman (1993), translated into Chinese by Wang Fu, a student of the Hui Scholar Ma Jian. In a foreword to the Chinese translation, Liu Jinglong states the purpose of the book: to display the Prophet's qualities of tolerance and egalitarian attitudes through the treatment of his wives; and to demonstrate the Prophet's ability to move and inspire his followers. It is their love of and faith in the Prophet which make them grateful receptacles of Islamic revolution and 'mothers of the believers'. Equality is illustrated in the Prophet's treatment of his wives as respect of their persons and personalities and in the women's willingness to participate and sacrifice themselves to the cause of the Prophet's religious mission (influential historical women who renounced marriage altogether, such as the eighth-century Sufi mystic Rabia el Basra, enjoy little exposure; an exception is the article by Ma Zhongping, 1996).

PLATE 8: An Arabic class, *hailifan* at the Hexi Mosque Arabic School, Zhoukou City, Henan Province. 10 October 1996 (Shui)

The qualities most often emphasised are associated with being supportive wives: Khadiyah, the first wife, has qualities of solid faith in her husband's mission and eventual success. She is devoted, untiring, encouraging and focused on her husband (Ma Yunfeng, 1990:97–98). These women severe ties with natal family and beloved home to follow the Prophet and the faith of Islam. The daughter Fatima is celebrated for becoming her father's 'inspired instrument'; active in social, military, and political affairs she was a 'heroine' (*jinguo yingxiong*). Interestingly, the author Ma Yunfeng links these qualities of all Arab women in their 'farsightedness', 'pursuit of truth', 'broadmindedness of vision' as personality features of the woman covered by the *chador* and the veil, thus presenting him with the opportunity of making a case both for such 'heroic' qualities and *hijab* as universally, and wrongly, maligned. Equal in every respect,

enjoying all rights, Ma continues, Arab women, like their prestigious ancestresses, build society together with men and receive deserved respect. Throughout the centuries, 'the essence of the veiled Arab women remains unchanged' (Ibid: 99) continuing in the tradition of Khadiyah and Fatima, their great forbears. The ambiguity in this discussion is illustrative of many discussions of Arab women: a society which is changing, modernising and growing in influence; and an incorporeal female nature which conceals under its veil an immutable essence. The veil as a constant symbol of God's endowment of women here turns into a uniquely Islamic symbol of sexual equality as complementarity: strength which is expressed in familial relationships, most importantly in a harmonious, conjugal union; assertiveness which is always ameliorated by gentle caring; a social conscience which is always first rooted in primary responsibilities of wife and motherhood. In recent years, discussion of *hijab* in Chinese Muslim press have received increasingly positive interpretation as suggestive of independent nationhood and Islamic resurgence (for ex., Fan Ruolan, 1991; Fu Fuyuan & Chen Fengli, 1991; Huang Minxing, 1992) which however translate into a sensitive debate of Islamic dress within a Chinese context.

Reminders are needed that whatever the shifting meanings of dress which can be observed often in women's personal decisions (such changes themselves the product of a more liberal social environment), structural limitations persist as a result of ethnic and political constraints. Harrell's conceptualisation of the function of minority women as metaphorical markers of the closeness to, or distance from, Han-centered criteria of civilisation (1996), is an astute gauge of the state's pervasive power of 'category creation' (Lindisfarne-Tapper & Ingham, 1997). When Hui nationality cadres react negatively to Hui women's adherence to Islamic dress, it is as much a function of membership of a perceived 'subordinate' ethnic group, and a challenge to this subordination, as it is a function of government office. The Hui cadre in a Minority Affairs office, responsible for a local Muslim community close to Huhehot, criticised the revival of Islamic teaching in his area by describing women's dress as indication of their 'low status' (*funu diwei di*); he went on to elaborate how these unfortunate women were unable to beautify themselves, such as perming their hair. Instead of partaking in the benefits of Han civilisation (*hanhua*), religion pressed these women into unnatural dress and stunted their progress (Interview with middle-aged Hui cadre, near Huhehot, May 1996). But women are not simply passive receptacles and effective symbols of patriarchal rule, they also have voices and power to act upon the structures in which they find themselves.

Women's Language of Dress: Redefining their Nature

In an intriguing essay Nathan Joseph explores the multiple meanings of 'layered clothing', arguing the conceptual inadequacy of 'singular' appearance under conditions of psychological and environmental pressure (1995:80–85). Images of Arab Muslim women were treated in Chapter VIII as part of the process by which Chinese Muslim women define themselves in relation to Arab Muslim and to Han Chinese women. Dress codes and their interpretations by wearers and the community provide a rich sign map of subjective states and social trends in which religious faith, ethnic belonging, national membership, aspirations to partake in modernity, all find their expression. How is one to interpret women's active negotiation of their structural positioning as religious and ethnic Other in relation to effect on, and 'clothing' of, the received notion of 'shame'?

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad found young Muslim women in Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait and the United States returning to an Islamic dress their mothers' generation had fought to discard. Haddad organises the responses given by young women to explain their action into nine categories: religious (out of a profound faith); psychological (choice of authentic over Western life-style); political (posed as a challenge to prevailing political norms); revolutionary (in support for Islamization of society); economic (a status symbol denoting leisure); cultural (adherence to values of chastity and protection from public gaze); demographic (identifying oneself as sophisticated urbanite); practical (refusal to follow fashion, thus saving money); domestic (in response to male kin demands) (Yazbeck, 1985:294). In this rich spectrum of motivations and meanings lies a caution against simplistic interpretations of women who choose to veil, but it also suggests the importance of specific and historical contextualisation. A polarised discussion over 'the Islamic veil', Leila Ahmed (1992) argues, originated in, and continued to be dominated by, Victorian colonialists' contempt for Other civilisations. In turn, revolutionary or resistance movements (whether in the Middle East or North Africa) responded to what was perceived as an attack on their masculinity and national development. This discourse then connected issues of women with that of 'cultures of Other men'. Ahmed continues: 'Because of this history of struggle around it, the veil is now pregnant with meanings. As item of clothing, however, the veil itself and whether it is worn are about as relevant to substantive matters of women's rights as the social prescription of one or another item of clothing is to Western women's struggles over substantive issues' (Ahmed, 1992:166).

In China, the history of women's religious dress entered a new phase of intense politicisation with the onset of a radical, mono-paradigmatic policy by

the Maoist State to mould the new socialist woman, discussed in Chapter VIII, in the time between the consolidation of Communism and the liberalisation of the mid-1980s (see Frick et al, 1995; Barlow, 1994). In the Maoist campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, women's religious dress became a symbol for ideological backwardness, and its secularisation, an expression of a proletarian consciousness. Between the stark choice of a new progressive China (through discarding of the symbolic trappings of Islam) and the stagnation of a decadent feudal system which was seen as overriding conventional religious praxis, women's dress, secular and religious, was steered by what Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham (1997) call a state's hegemonic act of 'category creation', thus defining contrastive, and mutually exclusive, realities of socialist progress or religious feudalism. The years since the Cultural Revolution which have seen greater relaxation of religious policies (since 1978), and less rigid ideological appropriations of women's minds and bodies, brought on developments which allow women to express increasingly diverse positions.

Although we must keep in mind the present small number of women's mosques, even fewer independent women's mosques (see Chapters IV, VII), their enduring and increasingly influential presence is undeniable, pointing to possibilities of women's challenge to patriarchal sources of gender legitimisation. Only in the rupture of interlinked and mutually supportive sources of patriarchal authority, whether or not religious, economic, intellectual, and legal, elsewhere weighing repressively on Muslim women, have Chinese female believers of Islam negotiated their ideals of a modernity which embraces Islamic piety. Tensions within and between loci of patriarchal authority, because variously and conflictually situated and circumscribed (thus needing to be seen against the larger context of Han Centre-Hui Muslim relations, of legal rights granted to ethnic minorities, and of a sacrosanct Party ideology of realised sexual egalitarianism), create space for tactical bargaining by which women appeal to, and play off against each other, secular and Islamic patriarchal authority.

Even in view of the above qualifications, there is evidence that women are breaking through political or religious homogenisation by defying both secular strictures and cultural conventions as well as Islamic male authority's guidelines. In Islamic clothing which lacks the features of colourful minority costumes beloved by sponsored state celebrations of ethnic diversity, these women appear in stark white or black head-dress or soft hats to demonstrate values that challenge the secular ideology and at the same time demand a hearing at national consultative congresses, provincial political meetings, local representation. When the Henan Representative Ma, Hui and Muslim, appears at political

meetings, she represents modern Chinese womanhood as much as religious Chinese women. And she wears her white hat with pride (also see Chapter VIII). When the 19-year old *xiao ahong* (junior *ahong*) Cao Nar moves inside her village, not far from Jiaozuo City in Henan, she does not cover her hair. She expects her male fellow-believers to practice principles of chaste conduct as she expects this of herself. Only when leaving the Hui village and entering the society of non-believers, does she (not necessarily always) don her *gaitou* (head-dress). The onus of principled conduct is for her both on women and men: 'we are all Muslims after all' (*women dou shi Huimin*). In the old society, she argues, Muslim women had no choice but to wear *gaitou*, otherwise mosque leaders and Hui society would ostracise you. But nowadays, women make up their own minds and wearing a *gaitou* is no longer what it used to be, namely enforced conformity. Feudalism, in whatever guise, is no longer acceptable to young women like herself who like to think of themselves, as she puts it, 'modern-minded' (Interview, October-November 1996).

When Du *Ahong* chooses to challenge the dress code of her Islamic tradition, the *gedimu pai*, by wearing a long head-dress instead of the ubiquitous hat, she takes on critical male *ahong* on their own terms. The controversial head-dress is turned into what Lindisfarne-Tapper (1997) calls 'symbolic capital', announcing defiantly women's encroachment on the highest moral grounds of Islamic purity which orthodoxy had maintained was the near exclusive reserve of male believers (see Chapter II, VIII). Keng-Fong Pang in her ethnographic study of Hainanese Muslim women discovers a re-awakening of fundamental Islamic values which, backed up by economic and political rights, she interprets as facilitating the 'empowerment' of Muslim women in society (1997). She does not raise the nature of empowerment from a viewpoint of religious women. Is empowerment, derived from a secular feminist context, to be equated with the empowerment practised by the fifteen young *hailifan* from Huhehot Women's Mosque who brave the stares and ridicule of non-Muslim urbanites each time they leave the mosque grounds, covered in adherence with the Islamic dress code; who told us that only since deepening their faith under the instruction of an erudite teacher, in preparation for their own religious teaching careers, have they felt the courage to manifest outwardly their inner convictions? As Ahmed (1992) pointed out in the citation above, the garment itself is of little relevance to understanding what it reveals about the lives of women; its politicisation lies in the meaning attached to it by others, by the collective, by the women themselves. Dress and female identity are connected in complex constellations of meaning to which debates, if predicated solely on the structural inequalities of *hijab* and arguments of false consciousness, fail to do justice to the wearers' exercise of

agency and their deliberations amid a range of options (see Bauer's criticism of methodological shortcomings in 'men's studies' of religion, 1997; also see Chapter I in this volume).

Du *Ahong* asserts her claim of spiritual superiority over her male colleagues and adversaries as well as over the construct of a projected 'celestial patriarchy' (Bauer, 1997) as a doubtful source of legitimate religious authority, when she wears a *gaitou* that is in breach with the convention of her Islamic tradition, the traditionalist *gedimu*, which favours the white *maozi*. The young Shan *Ahong* from a small town in Henan asserts her membership of a universal religion, and thus her claim to transnational modernity, by wearing a *gaitou*; she also transcends the boundaries by which the authorities have shrunk Islam to function as an 'ethnic religion'. In that, because consciously chosen, she is recognisably Other. The trend noted previously among women who aspire to the rejoining of a universal Islamic community, given outward expression in the wearing of religious dress which is modelled on an Arabic (largely Saudi Arabian) paradigm, is compounded by the increasing number of women pilgrims. Returning pilgrims, *haji*, tend to be more strict in their observance of Islamic dress including in some cases the frequent wearing of a long voluminous garment which is mandatory for pilgrimages (Lin Yi, 1995). The readiness to change to a modest Islamic dress varies with the reception a particular community gives to it (its urban or rural milieu, the presence of a women's mosque and women's religious community), on age (the older a woman, the more acceptable such outer expression), and of course, on peer support (as given by fellow believers), and the nature of the individual woman, as for example Du *Ahong* in Zhengzhou, Henan, whose decision to shift from hat to head-dress has not wavered under lack of external encouragement. On the other hand, many a woman informant confessed that her private desire was for Islamic dress, but that the secular atmosphere of urban China inhibited her for fear of ridicule, gossip and insinuations of a backward attitude.

Women's growing readiness to consult their individual conscience and preference (not determined, but often facilitated, by a given local environment) is also leading to decisions to live as practising Muslims in entirely secular dress, unless joining in worship when *gaitou* is mandatory. But in Kunming, Yunnan, younger women (and men) worshipping with hair uncovered are not a rare sight (despite the misgivings of *ahong*). Here the peculiar context of a multi-ethnic culture tends to make for a disassociation of Hui (defined as *da minzu*, tantamount to Han status) from the other national minorities in Yunnan, and from the status of *shaoshu minzu* (ethnic minority) as connotative of cultural and socio-economic backwardness. Islamic dress is therefore rejected as 'minority'

dress and thus ‘inappropriate’ (*bu heshi*) for modern, progressive Muslims for whom opportunities for interaction with foreign Muslims provide an additional rationale for wishing to raise their status. Ma Qiaoying, the manager of a Muslim Special Goods Store in Kunming, finds her inspiration in Aisha, the youngest wife of Muhammed, and withstands traditional constructions of ‘minority woman’ status through secular dress (interview September 1996; also see Chapter VIII for young Yunnanese Muslim’s defiant stance on secular dress and religious aspirations in confrontation with an *ahong* from Qinghai).

This chapter has addressed, but not resolved, the existential ambiguities in women ‘thinking’ their body as a site of God-ordained affliction. In terms of Julia Kristeva’s concept of the female as a ‘boundary subject’, an ideology of origin of *xiuti* has co-opted ‘biology’ into the determining force of feminine consciousness. In discussing how gender is used to conceive and build power, Joan Scott quotes the French anthropologist Maurice Godelier: ‘It is not sexuality which haunts society, but society which haunts the body’s sexuality. Sex-related differences between bodies are continually summoned as testimony to social relations and phenomena that have nothing to do with sexuality. Not only as testimony to, but also testimony for – in other words, as legitimation’ (quoted in Scott, 1988:45). What seems noteworthy from our findings concerns the relationship between bodily markers of spiritual progress and legitimisation of a gender status quo as no longer outside women’s capacity to identify and renegotiate. Women-related political reform in post-1949 China, however critical we may be of its ultimate achievement (Croll, 1994; Gilmartin et al, 1994), has infused gender relations with a greater flexibility which makes female submission to men no longer everywhere an automatic equation with the fundamental duties of a Muslim woman. When some of the most articulate and forthright women *ahong* ponder a direct relationship between God and women, to the exclusion of male intermediaries, they not only question the immutability of a ‘celestial patriarchy’, intervening thereby in its secular subtext of a more worldly gender hierarchy, but they also begin to determine their own existential and social worth.

Note

1 When the Talaban, a fundamentalist Muslim group, sought to translate military victory over Kabul, Afghanistan, into consolidated rule in September of 1996, one of its first decrees was the most severe sexual segregation and banishment of women from public spaces unless unavoidable and totally veiled. A BBC World Service reporter heard first reactions from women and men. A professional urban woman indicated her views when she spoke of ‘men in fear’. A Talaban soldier, encountered in the street, offered this justification for the strict *hijab*; he thought ‘women were like electric wire, touch them and one is

likely to go into shock’.

Chapter X

The Feminisation of Purgatory: Mediating Spiritual Faith and Equality

> Marriage is a borderline institution between two antagonistic and irreconcilable entities – God and woman (Fatna Sabbah, 1984:50).

'The crux of the problem surrounding the status of women,' so T.F. Carroll (1983:222) maintains, cannot be uncovered in an analysis of formal Islam but must go beyond the structures of belief to ask how adherents of Islam understand the demands their faith makes on them. This poses a difficult methodological problem. How is one to document and interpret those beliefs which shape how Muslim women live lives conceived of as straddling mortal existence *(jinsheng)* and afterlife *(houshi)*, embedded in a religious time of co-existing present and future?

In a short essay, representative of many such writings in the magazine *Zhongguo Muselin* (Chinese Muslim), Zhang Qian argues the officially-sanctioned line which views Muslims as deeply committed to, and engaged in, the society of which they are grateful members. It is an innocuous piece of writing which, ostensibly writing Muslims into the main-body of Chinese nationhood, conveys to those who read 'between the lines' the central message of the real stakes by which lives must be evaluated: rooted in the Islamic revelation which 'emphasises the short duration of this life and eternal bliss of afterlife' (Zhang, 1994:21). A subtext contained within on lived Islamic faith can be understood only by reference to the implicit conviction that the present is transitory and to be faced by the faithful as a series of divinely ordained 'trials' (*kaoyan*) in anticipation of eternal life (Zhang Qian, 1994:20–22). Situated in this context of a 'dual life', interdependent and yet each containing the negation of the other, are popular discourses on the quality of female spirituality and on the source of conflict in an in-built, patriarchal contradiction between the primary duty incumbent upon women to be good wives and mothers, and their duties as good Muslims – mediated within the 'social organisation of tradition'

which Richard T. Antoun (1989) refers to as ‘linking institutions’, such as mosques and ‘culture brokers’, *ahong* and other persons in positions of authority. Out of these tensions arise women’s fear, terror of purgatory and hell and, more wistful perhaps, hope for divine mercy.

Spiritual Equality in Islam

The significance of the space we call the mosque is what its inhabitants make it, says Mernissi (1991:69). Unlike in other religions, the site of worship is not a building or a construction but a perspective which turns the act of prayer into a cosmic rite revolving around the Ka’ba. ‘… the Prophet’s architecture created a space [the mosque] in which the distance between private life and public life was nullified, where physical thresholds did not constitute obstacles’ (Mernissi, 1991:113). Yet, as in the closed Muslim communities of Northwest China, women are excluded from participation in ritual worship, because they are held to interfere in men’s communication with Allah, and because of their ignorance (Dai Jianning, 1992). Moreover, the mutual reinforcement of social and symbolic segregation, of the separation of domestic from sacred of women’s worlds from men’s worlds, finds its legitimacy in reference to Islamic traditions. Faith, gained through knowledge and intelligence, *aql*, is thus situated in structures of power outside the reach of women. Within this intimate linkage between faith and informed adherence to sacred revelations, decoded only by a few *ahong* (mainly male) and scholars, a gendered religious and social hierarchical order is maintained. Whereas Islam has no clergy in the sense of a Christian church hierarchy, its patriarchal culture has engendered inequalities which perpetuate circumscribed access to superior knowledge, and thus to spirituality.

To treat religion as a part of women’s lived-in-reality entails questions of meaning which must incorporate the notion of transcendence. Historians of the phenomenology of religion like Katherine Young demand that we approach ‘the religious domain … on its own terms. Interpretations, in other words, must take religion seriously, not bypass it’ (Young, 1987:4). In order to assess the varying impact religious systems have had on women, Young suggests a typology of patriarchal world religions whereby she differentiates between ethnic and universal religions. The ethnic category (in which she places Judaism, Hinduism and Confucianism) is, on the one hand, characterised by association with a defined territory, based on distinctive hierarchical socio-sexual arrangements which are patrilineal and patrilocal in nature, and which enshrine and circumscribe the role of motherhood as a guarantor of cultural as well as

biological survival.

The category of universal religion to which Islam belongs, on the other hand, is distinguished by a revolutionary shift from ethnically-rooted to universally-transcendent identity. ‘When the new group was formed, its identity was based *initially on association* rather than birth, and *access to the soteriology was individual*, though it often came to be mediated by the group’ (Young, 1987:21, emphasis is mine). At least in the early stage of the religious movement, women experienced themselves as individuals and their experiences of conversion as affirming their uniqueness before God. Equality in access to the soteriology entailed by definition emancipation from an identity shaped by the traditions and customs of an overarching tribal group. It is important to recognise, at least initially, that universalism is seen as having mitigated male dominance through a radical soteriological equality and an emphasis on personal, unmediated experience. Also, Islam in its founding stage was predicated on social reforms which had important consequences for women: abolition of female infanticide, inheritance rights, right of control over dowry and polygynous nature of marriage, centrality of husband-wife relationship underpinned by emphasis on strict moral code (Young, 1987:22; see also Chapter VI).

Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1991), like Young, sees the true implications of faith for women to lie in their direct relationship with God, unencumbered by patriarchal readings and dicta and infused with the recognition of the gift of a sovereign will. Quoting Mircea Eliade, Mernissi demands that women’s personal experience of the sacred be treated as ‘the real par excellence’ and thus be recognised as the life-affirming powers of religiosity, a ‘source of life and fertility’ (Mernissi, 1996:27).

The heart of Islamic religion is its book of divine revelations, the Koran, spoken through God’s messenger, Mohammed, in the language of the messenger, Arabic. In it the creator of the world reveals the origins, purpose, laws and social constitution of this world. The Koran lays the ground for those who follow Allah’s will in fear and awe and describes the rewards awaiting the faithful disciples; it also evokes the dreadful fate which will befall the disobedient and negligent. The Koran is the source of faith, the words of God, and in it all questions and needs the believers might have are answered and taken care of. It is the practical and constructive guide to daily life; it is the source of spiritual nourishment. ‘Whereas the divine presence is manifest for Jews in the Law and for Christians in the person of Christ, it is in the Quran that Muslims directly encounter God’ (Antoun, 1989:6, quoting William A. Graham).

The Koran testifies to the equality of women and men before God (Amina Wadud-Muhsin, 1993). Both are called upon to be witnesses to the oneness of

God and the terror of the final day of judgement. Several passages give emphatic confirmation of the principle of equality; men and women are rewarded for their good deeds with no regard to sexual identity: 'We shall reward the steadfast according to their noblest deeds. Be they men or women, those that embrace the Faith and do what is right We will surely grant a happy life; We shall reward them according to their noblest deeds' *(sura* 16:94; also similar affirmations in *sura* 3:195, 4:122). A growing Islamic literacy, observes Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, has engendered the conviction among many contemporary Muslim women that .. [women's] equality is not granted as a gift from men out of benevolence, but is assumed as their God-given right affirmed repeatedly in the Qur'an' (1985:295). It is not the text, the Koran, which is voiceless on the question of gender equality, the Malaysian scholar Wadud-Muhsin affirms, the voicelessness of women has been engendered by a long tradition of patriarchal interpretations of the holy text and the institutions built on them (1993:2; see Chapter II.1 for feminist scholarship on Islam).

This linkage of sexual liberation with the promise of soteriological equality in Islam is not as yet a trend in debates in Chinese Islam (see Chapter II.2 on themes in Chinese Muslim historiography). However, when Muslim women respond to attacks on the institution of female *ahong* by recalcitrant fellow believers with '*tamen [nanren] bu liaojie gulanjing'* (they [men] don't understand the meaning of the Koran), or when they say that '*tamen [nanren] shou fengjian shehuide yinxiang'* (they [men] suffered the influence of feudal thought), they too express their claim to the revolution Islamic religion once brought to women. It is around the debate over the status of *nusi* (women's mosques) under female *ahong* that the quality of female spirituality and the qualification of women to occupy positions of spiritual leadership are most hotly contested. The Chinese scholar Gong Jianqing (1989) claims for Islam the might of a sexual revolution. Through Islam women were first recognised in their human dignity, were given status and equal rights. The Prophet Mohammed, so Gong (1989:32) asserts, '*shi funu huode zbenzhengde renge'* (made women obtain genuine self-worth). Arguing along similar lines as Wadud-Muhsin, Gong blames the inequalities which undeniably exist in Muslim societies on the ignorance of rights on the part of women, thus made voiceless and unable to stand up to men's deficient understanding of the revelations.

The most crucial mainstay of Islamic belief presented to ordinary Muslims in a simple question and answer format is in *Mumin Bidu* (Muslim Prime Reader), published by the Beida Mosque Management Committee in Qinyang City, Henan, in 1996. What makes for the *yimani* (faith) of a true Muslim? Genuine belief, profession of a true recognition that God revealed Himself and his

intentions through the Prophet (*Mumin Bidu*, 1996:1). Belief is in Allah, the angels, the Koran, the saints, afterlife, and God-informed Fate (*qianding*). Total submission to the duties incumbent upon any genuine Muslim and an informed fear of the violation of these injunctions demands faith in God and his disciple, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and (if possible) pilgrimage. But as these duties are by necessity couched in general terms, who interprets these into rules and procedures so that a Muslim woman in late-20th century rural China can make sense of them? Who distinguishes between the general and the particular, the essential and the non-essential duty? Who tells women how to save their souls?

'If a person has no faith whatsoever, then it is definitely impossible to want to know the world; when desiring to genuinely comprehend the world, one not only needs faith but one must be determined to persevere in unwavering faith, only thus people's knowledge in terms of faith has its base, only thus is there a clear purpose, only thus may one attain the fruits of needful knowledge' (Ibid: 140). Knowledge of God and the world is predicated on faith. On the other hand, faith without knowledge is an equally imperfect equation.

The widely-read '*Gulanjing' Zhexue Sixiang* (Philosophical Thoughts in the Koran) tells of the historical downward-spiral of humans from an enlightened, paradisical knowledge of the world (the unobstructed union with God) to one of alienation and aberration (Yang Qichen, 1995; reprinted four times since it was first published in 1991). A world in disarray is depicted, with only a few chosen sage prophets able to hear the words of God and therefore to share revelations through the scriptures with those who are willing and able to understand the divine injunctions. Faith and knowledge are intrinsically linked in an equation which is the basis of Islamic doctrine – and the essential contradiction in women believers' perseverance to be good women and good Muslims.

Knowledge and the Quality of Faith

In the Salarz*u* district of Hualong in Qinghai Province (the *Salar* minority belongs to one of the ten designated Muslim minorities), which borders on Gansu Province, women's illiteracy is high and economic resources are scarce. The minaret of the mosque, which dominates the town of Hualong, calls only men to prayer. One evening in the autumn of 1995, just before worship, we encountered an elderly woman, standing at the threshold of her home, who invited us into her garden. The contrast of blooming flowers and luxurious bushes and plants in her courtyard with the bleak arid landscape of the Qinghai Plateau outside was stark. The contrast between this simple woman's world and the outside became more nuanced as she began to talk about her family. With her

children grown-up and working away from Hualong, she spends her days at home. She has no other point of connection with the world outside her courtyard. As she was describing to us the pattern of her daily existence, the *muanjin* at the nearby mosque called out to the faithful to assemble for prayer. Not to her. Women do not worship at mosques in this region. But even worship at home was not possible because she is ignorant of the rites and prayers she told us sadly. The darkness which was falling over the town seemed even darker as we left her to tend to her domestic duties (visit, October 1995, Hualong, Qinghai Province).

One of the very few Chinese Hui scholars to explore the relationship of faith to gender and organised Islam is Dai Jianning (1992; for a more general ethnography of Muslim communities in Northwest China, see Ma Ping & Lai Cunlin, 1995). Based on fieldwork in Northwest Chinese Hui Muslim areas where women's mosques are uncommon (see Chapter IV), he interprets women's faith in relation to their place in the social order, and as walled in spiritually as well as economically by patriarchal norms.

Four aspects of women believers' psychology are explored in Dai's study: *shuncong* (submission), *xmixing* (preoccupation with trivia or with the minutiae of life), *jingwei* (an intense veneration of God), and *jixie* (a mechanical inflexibility in women's approach to religion). The submissiveness demanded from a good Muslim (by definition, someone who submits to God's will) is reinforced in the case of Hui women by a characteristic yielding that marks feminine psychology *(mixing xinlixue)*, argues Dai Jianning, and which produces a mutually reinforcing situation whereby women are not wont to challenge those precepts and teachings, whether religious or secular in nature, which place them in position of subordination to secular society and to Islamic, male-dominated mosque society. Koranic statements on women, although historically of undoubted significance for women's emancipation from Arab feudalism, are proving to be fetters now on contemporary women. Segregation in religious sphere prevents women from worshipping together with men and from benefiting from the imam's instructions and ritual leadership. Women's inferior social status and the numerous Islamic strictures on women which make religious professions almost exclusively a male preserve, in turn, bar Hui women from religious education; the more women are excluded from formal education, the less likely they will be able to aspire to the office of an *ahong*; that is, with the exception of those women who benefit from a supportive home environment where males are ready to impart to their sisters or daughters religious knowledge, or those few women who are able to take part in mosque-based education (Dai, 1992:68).

Patriarchal organisation in the religious sphere, the hierarchy structured along

gender lines, women's exclusion from prayer rituals and knowledge, and from positions of authority, all these factors, Dai argues, combine to construct a kind of faith which is rooted in, and reinforcing of, feminine submissiveness. Women's absence from mosques, sites of spiritual affirmation and thus power also of secular foundation, reaffirms women's absence as a basic existential (and political feature) of their existence.

Another aspect of faith, the knowledge needed in the realisation of faith to full spirituality, leads Dai to propose a provocative thesis. Whilst women are seen in Islam, not unlike other religious traditions, to be rigorously adhering to the rules and regulations of Islam – more rigorously than men, according to Dai – their *qiancheng* (devoutness) is informed by female preoccupation with, and pursuit of, *xinixing* (the minutiae of life). This has engendered a female psychology that is wedded to outward forms and adherence to conventional praxis of rituals and rites which however is not matched by a true grasp of substantive issues in religion. Women's inferior education and social duties render them prone to emotionalism and mood-changes and make them less able to undertake spiritual search and intellectual projects. Outwardly, women may appear superior disciples of the faith, but their inferior comprehension and deficient grasp of theological and doctrinal issues, concepts and thought, allow only for a faith which must always remain infantile (Ibid: 69). In an early ethnography of peasant women's religious culture in North China, the German anthropologist Brunhild Korner makes similar observations when she remarks on the contrast between men's superficial adherence to ceremonial duties and women's close attention to the ritual guidelines. 'However, women frequently lack comprehension of purpose and meaning of the overall system, whereas they are fully alive to its abundance of detail' (Körner, 1959:72).

A further dimension of faith is *jingwei*, women's adoration or veneration of God. Why is this veneration so intense? Because it is tinged with terror women feel at their distance from God, mired as they are in the petty preoccupation of domestic life, and therefore forever in the clutches of an overriding sense of inadequacy (Dai, 1992). It seems entirely reasonable to deduce from Dai's argument the conclusion that 'a good wife and mother' is by definition a 'deficient Muslim' who is reduced to a state of angst at the thought of afterlife. Fear of damnation plays on the ignorance of women of their rights and informs the subjectivity of Muslim women in a hue of dread. The evocative descriptions of the horror of hell in the Koran and in the many Hadiths as well as the sermons of zealous preachers serve to intensify the psychological pressure felt by women.

Muslim women's physiological and psychological constitution makes them devout adherents to form and ritual, but inferior to men in abstract reasoning and

intensity of comprehension. Dai Jianning acknowledges the social factors as contributing to women's inferiority in knowledge whereby not only Islamic tradition and traditional concepts, but also women's low self-esteem and Confucian patriarchal evaluation of women, all play a part in shaping the female gender. Women's biology on the one hand, social, physiological and psychological factors on the other hand, reinforce each other to culminate in *fei ziwoxing shiji* (self-abnegation) as a proclaimed natural feminine virtue. A precondition of faith results in a loss of self. Women's absence from mosque sites, the sites of spiritual concentration and secular power, reaffirms their 'absence' as a basic existential feature of their existence. In this analysis, religious praxis adds to social and biological factors to engender an environment that makes women into conscientious, if fearful, disciples and dependent social beings.

From Marriage to Purgatory

At the heart of women's difficulty lies the seemingly irreconcilable: women's time-consuming, daily duty to the family. In Chinese ancestor worship, the married state guarantees a place at the ancestral altar and worship by descendants, thus peace in afterlife, whereas in Islam marriage is the bind which seems to propel women into the state of religious neglect and danger to the fate of their soul.

Yet women's fear of hell and damnation stems from an in-built systemic contradiction which is of patriarchal origin: gender prescriptions obstruct the fundamental prescriptions which define a Muslim's duties, prominently among them is worship. Traditionalist, mostly rural, women *ahong* preach the horror of damnation for women, thus increasing fatalism. In Friedl's study (1980) of a Shi'a Muslim village in pre-Revolution Iran, she describes the different expectations of women and men for their fate in afterlife. Whereas hell evokes male response of a general abhorrence, women envisage very specific cruelties to be inflicted on them because of their sex. Conversely, notions of heaven only promise the most general, rather vague bliss for women, whereas the men confidently anticipate gender-specific pleasures and facilities ensuring eternal male satisfaction (Friedl, 1980:167–168).

In Korner's ethnographic work, peasant women in a North Chinese village disappointed the researcher with their 'totally vague impression concerning the supernatural world' and in particular women's ignorance of the hierarchy and classification of the spirit world (1959:59). However, Korner acknowledges her women informants' store of legends and miracles, even if unable to place them

in their proper religious tradition. ‘The women are pious by sheer disposition and display in the face of everything supernatural [an attitude of] worship and submission’ (1959:59). Korner turned to male informants in pursuit of information, but does not discuss women’s imaginings. One wonders whether women, although unable to distinguish between Daoist and Buddhist sources of tradition, might not have been able, if asked, to give very full accounts of the ninth hell, almost exclusively set aside for female sinners, with its blood hell or *xuepen* (a gigantic vessel filled to the rim with evil-smelling menstrual blood), described elsewhere in Korner’s study (1959:63–64). Whereas women may lack a profound grasp of religious doctrine, they nevertheless tend towards a deep-seated fear of omnipresent supernatural forces. Judging from our study, this feature is not confined to a specific religious tradition. Emblematic of gender and class inequalities in access to educational, cultural, economic and political resources, the impotent dread of divine retribution permeates many a woman’s religious praxis.

Although separated by membership of a different Islamic tradition, by a different cultural and political context, the village women in Friedl’s study and the Muslim women in Chinese Hui villages, but not exclusively in villages, are bound by their fear that burdened with the character and duties God wills on women, they are more likely bound for hell than men. It is women who are prone to sin, starkly demonstrated in their frequent ritual uncleanness; in other words, they are ‘bad Muslims’ because they are women. In the Iranian village, women’s character was never pardoned by God, Friedl says, only explained because God willed it such (Ibid: 170).

The 67 year old *ahong* at a women’s mosque near Boai Town (Henan), which belongs to the *gedimu pai* (traditional school), says that she carries a heavy burden. Sin and sinfulness inscribe the body of all women because Allah saw fit ‘to arrange it this way’ (interview conducted in November, 1996). Her remaining inner strength, depleted by age, a cold winter in an unheated room, and most of all fear, is concentrated on saving women, including herself from hell. Her dread is great that despite her many years of exertion to educate women and guide them through mosque prayers, it will ultimately be to no avail. ‘*Nuren xinli you kufoule’* (women are prone to err in their belief) she says about women in her congregation, about all women. Eve’s daughters must ‘*haipa houshi’* (fear afterlife), Shan *Ahong* reiterates, because God condemns women to life given over to the inescapable mire of domestic duties, pregnancies and menstrual, impure times, all which darkens women’s souls and leads them astray. As in the case of Shi’ate women villagers, Shan *Ahong* cannot imagine any escape from this fear. Women are burdened with specific afflictions, impurities, duties and

punished in consequence with damnation '*yinwei anla anpaide'* (because Allah willed it so). A peasant fatalism compounds the belief in a pre-determined life to which all believers cannot but submit. To believe otherwise is to doubt God's wisdom.

But not only in villages, also in townships, elderly *nu ahong* and ordinary women believers stand in dread of God's punishment. Women are reminded through frequent narration of Eve's Fall from Grace of their descent, and of the legacy God wills on all women; the abyss is ever present. Even where members of women's mosques display determination to press for recognition for their rights to exist in equal recognition with their men, even where women's equal rights is an ever-present reference in self-evaluations by female *ahong*, even when conversations touch upon eternal life, the underlying troubling dynamic revives. The fatal causality which *kaoyan* (tries) women as heirs to Eve's frailty cannot be broken. All the advances women have made in education and social participation, admits one of the most independent *ahong*, Du *Ahong* in Zhengzhou, does not alter this fundamental flaw: that relative to men, women's capacity to enter into God's presence is compromised. The Prophet saw in hell female souls because they succumbed to weaknesses inherent to women (interview, October 1996). *Yibilise* (the devil) is everywhere, and where there are women, he is particularly active, says Guo *Ahong* (interview, November 1996). This Hadith is central to the religious culture of Chinese Muslim women as it connects the state of faith with women-specific ignorance and prognosis for salvation that qualifies the Koranic message.

However, *ahong* can also console, suggest remedies, or reinterpret vital passages to increase women's awareness of men's role in unduly burdening women's spiritual dread as, for example, through a historical contextualisation of the Prophet's horror at the high ratio of damned female souls writhing in hellfire. The more progressive *ahong* proclaim this Hadith as reflecting a particular historical state of female ignorance which must not continue to afflict contemporary women, with their greater knowledge of religion, access to the guidance of female *ahong* and thus participation in collective worship and, in consequence, heightened expectation of full soteriological equality. These *ahong* are most critical of those colleagues among them whose 'peasant ignorance' instils such dread in the congregation of gullible believers. 'They are the most superstitious, *kufoule* [*kufr*], they are as superstitious as the old system which made for such ideas', says the young Mei *Ahong* critically. She was educated in an Islamic college in Zhengzhou, well educated also in secular knowledge, and sees herself as a progressive force in women's education. Her comments on her older, highly esteemed colleague at another women's mosque in the village, are

tinged with barely repressed anger, perhaps contempt, at the superstition which clouds the *ahong's* interpretations (interview, November 1996, in Daxinzhuang).

Because *ahong* on the whole tend to be married (if unmarried, this problem is quickly remedied) and burdened by conflicting demands from family and mosque, they understand the pressures under which women live. Shan *Ahong* was able only at the age of thirty-six to take up a much-longed for duty, having submitted dutifully to a conservative husband and mother-in-law and raised four children. Guo *Ahong* had to wait until her late fifties before the husband could be persuaded to give his permission to her wish to apply for a position as an *ahong* in Zhengzhou. The 27 year old Shan *Ahong* in Qinyang Town is kept often from fulfilling her duty at the mosque when her mother-in-law insists that duties as daughter-in-law and mother come first.

Often the life of a *shiniang*, an *ahong's* wife, serves as an illustration of the tensions which beset women in traditional gender roles. The 22 year old *shiniang* in Huayangzhai, near Zhengzhou (Henan), born and raised in the conservative Muslim milieu of Pingliang, Gansu Province, received no formal education but learnt from her mother all that she needed to know about Islam. She has rudimentary Persian which allows her to lead classes for women and children (during holidays) in ritual and religious knowledge – if and when she is free from her duty as a wife and the mother of a small child. Her marriage was arranged for her by the Koran teacher and she agreed as it is the fate of all women to submit, marry, give birth, and follow their husbands. She leads prayers, when she finds the time, in the small adjacent women's mosque, which has no resident female *ahong*. In the view of this *shiniang*, all women are inferior to men in knowledge, station in life, and in the understanding of deeper religious issues. In consequence, fear of afterlife is a natural outcome of women's natural predicament. She says that she is constantly afraid, and sometimes cannot help thinking about the suffering to be expected in the afterlife. For an understanding of her role in God's plan, of women's function in society and fate after death, she depends on her husband, a 26 year old *ahong*, who cites passages from the Koran to underline his contention that women are designed as weaker than men in rational powers and as in need of their guidance in matters of importance (interviews, November 1996).

In this middle-income village of about 1,300 people, almost entirely Hui and Muslim, where many women tend to work outside the home, the young *shiniang* is rarely sought out for advise. Preoccupied with her young family, she is perceived by village women as lacking in social authority and the necessary comprehension of a complicated world. Instead, they turn to family and friends in times of conflict, and to the director of the *funuhui* (local women's

association) in matters of family planning. A few middle-aged and a greater number of old women worship in the newly-built *nusi* which is totally controlled and managed by the *shetou* of the *nansi* (men's mosque). However familiar the *shiniang'*s predicament of raising a small child and coping with tasks outside the home, familiarity does not invite confidences. The *shiniang'*s identity rests with her husband, and thus her husband's mosque, not with the *nusi* and the few women who pray there alone whenever they find the time.

In the discussions of women's spiritual states, the obstacles cited to their enlightenment, and thus to perfect spirituality, shared and confronted by religious leaders and their female congregations alike, seem overwhelming. Guo *Ahong*, residing at one of Zhengzhou's women's mosques, traces women's afflictions back to their ancestress Eve. Not only did the consequence of her sin result in menstruation and childbearing, turning her womb into a site of personal suffering and source of ritual pollution, women were as a result also afflicted with more worldly responsibilities which obstructed their gaze at Mecca. More labour, less time for spiritual enrichment and opportunities to advance themselves placed men ahead of women. Women, according to Guo *Ahong*, are trapped in a mire of shame and ignorance and in consequence are more prone to neglect their fundamental duties as Muslims, because too exhausted. Chinese Muslim women carry a burden still heavier than that of their Muslim sisters elsewhere. Their ignorance is an ignorance increased manifold because of widespread ignorance of Koranic languages and the corrosive forces of a secular and modernising society in which modernity is inseparable from a secular philosophy (interviews, autumn 1995, spring and autumn 1996).

Fates of Female Souls

The Koran promises women equality in damnation as well as in salvation. 'But we shall say: Call the sinners, their spouses, and the idols which they worshipped besides God, and lead them to the path of Hell' *(sura* 37:24). Wadid-Muhsin (1993) holds that the Koran makes no gender distinction when it comes to death, resurrection, final judgement, or recompense and punishment in the hereafter (1993:52). Indeed, her careful dissection of biased use of Arabic grammar reveals original meanings (addressed to the gender-neutral individual) and orthodox (gendered) readings at odds with each other. One needs to turn to the Hadiths and many tales popular among believers to find fuller, and gender-specific, accounts of the subject of damnation.

As Riffat Hassan points out (1991:93–96), regardless of justified scholarly scepticism about the authenticity of much of the Hadith tradition, its 'personal

and religious aspects' (Ibid: 95) are undeniably important, that is, the subjective meanings with which women and men imbue these traditions. In her important study of the complexity of symbols, Caroline Walker Bynum notes that '…not only gender-related symbols but all symbols arise out of the experience of "gendered" users. It is not possible ever to ask How does a symbol – *any* symbol – mean? without asking For whom does it mean?' (Bynum, 1986:3; italics in text).

Not only in Chinese Islamic tradition are women's essential nature and the dire consequence for eternal life a matter of earnest male discourse (see Chapter II.2). In a much published and widely distributed booklet, *Wives of the Prophet*, supplied to school and public libraries in Pakistan, one may read the following account: 'He [the Prophet] frankly told a gathering "I have seen more women in Hell." People asked, "Why, O Prophet of God, do they deny the presence of God"? He replied: "Women are ungrateful to men for their favours. They invariably fulfil their obligations, but if they fail in one single instance, the women abuse them and say, "We never got any favour from you. You don't give us anklets or bangles or fancy rings." This is a clear proof that his greatest solicitude for women was for their salvation in the next world' (F. H. Malik, 1966 edition: 38–39). The interpretations of this preponderance of women writhing in the flames of hell are always instructive. The writer of the booklet expands greatly on the theme of women's ingratitude, essentialising women into weak, helpless vessels who in their sphere of responsibility have important tasks of mothering and nurturing to pursue, in line with what Malik calls 'sex individuality' (Ibid: 44). For the sake of their worldly welfare and to ensure the salvation of their soul, women must depend on men. 'In another context he [the Prophet] remarked that if a woman did not live with her husband she was not entitled to maintenance, in some cases not to dower even, and her place would be in hell' (Ibid: 43).

In the Chinese Sunni tradition the vision by the Prophet Mohammed cited by Malik above is equally prominent and frequently cited in literary as well as popular discourse. The late-17th century Hui scholar Ma Zhu (1988 reprint) states, 'The scriptures say: "Hell is, because there are women". And again: "There are only women in hell." Who would not be afraid' (1988 reprint: 429)! Ma Zhu offers the explanation, already introduced at an earlier point (Chapter II.2), that many of the female souls may well be originally men whose ignorance led to their downfall, *'nanzi wu xue, yizong jiao zuo furen'* (Ibid: 429). But this argument too provides for little comfort as it defines the fall from grace as the engendering of the female state. However, it very early provides an important explanation of women's spiritual vulnerability which links damnation with

ignorance, that is, lack of knowledge, rather than women's lack of acceptance of God-given 'sex individuality'. Significantly, it is this particular interpretation of the Prophet's vision of feminised hell which forms the foreword of Islamic texts studied by women (*nurenjing*) in women's mosques today (Chapters III in this volume; also see Glossary): women are in hell because they have nowhere to go and no one to ask when they have questions about the ritual matters which constitute Muslim believers' lifeline to salvation.

As noted by Friedl in her study of Shi'ate Muslims (1980), women's conception of paradise is far less explicit and elaborate than their narration of hell. Is it possible to see women's association with 'earth', and disassociation from 'heaven' in traditional Chinese cosmology as adding to their sense of alienation from the pleasures of paradise? Elizabeth Croll's recent interpretation of the failure of women's development in China (1994) suggests the need to consider a further cultural dimension in which women's anxiety and alienation might be located in the indigenous culture of a traditional dual cosmology of *yin* and *yang*, earth and heaven. In her study of images and experiences of development in China, Croll examines the record of sexual egalitarianism and Communist rhetoric for women through the images of the most famous egalitarian slogan: women are Half of Heaven. The history of women's troubled identification with the idea of Heaven, Croll argues, arises from an ideational orthodoxy of a symbolic and social universe which encodes gendered personhood, attributes and social functions to the detriment of women.

When the Chinese Communist Party, says Croll, granted half of Heaven in a grandiose exercise of rhetoric and centrally-steered social engineering, women's actual lives and life's expectations failed to match optimistic expectations (what Lucian Pye calls the imperatives of optimism, 1988). Women remained estranged, visitors on parade, tokens rather than integrated and fully-functioning members. Not only recalcitrant patriarchy and uneven disruptive economic development policy programme, but also women's experience within a gender-specific life-cycle is seen as a more crucial explanation. Women's lives are structured by the key-event of marriage, around which flow anticipation, hope, trepidation, and seemingly limitless possibilities before the rupture of marriage foreshortens the woman's existential perspective. The formerly eagerly anticipated future collapses into the routine of domestic preoccupation by which a female life-cycle is defined and constricted (Croll, 1994:205–212). Is women's cosmos indeed so bounded by temporal affinal relationships, the site of women's 'uterine' family (Margery Wolf, 1972), that it cannot match the expansive, utopian prospects of a patrilineal ideology, unable even to aspire to an ultimate transcendence of gender and power relations through visions of a divine justice?

The Place of Female Virtue

Enduring ambiguities which survive even into the most sincere protestations of spiritual equality in practised Islam can be detected in the uses and shifting interpretations of a popular citation which becomes a part of conversations wherever we talk about women's position in Islam (see also Chapter II.2 for a slightly different interpretation of the meaning of the saying recorded by Liu Zhi as early as 1710). The citation appears in contexts in which women's spirituality is either highlighted as a positive force in Islam, or in which the promise of hope for women in the struggle for spiritual equality is expressed. Male Muslims will make reference to what is considered a core Islamic precept whenever they sense criticism over the treatment of women in Islam: as evidence of the spiritual heights women may aspire to – granted they are worthy. Women quote this precept in a more militant voice: to stress not only their spiritual potential but also their superiority over men. The fact that the odds are against them is less important than the fact that women are open to this possibility granted – some of the more independent-minded women will say – feudal attitudes and defensive men are not continuously obstructing their way to paradise.

The version we know from Liu Zhi which tells us that 'one virtuous woman is a-thousand times worthier than a man' is often supplanted by '*yige qingliangde nuren shengguo yiqiange qingliangde nanren*' (one virtuous woman is a-thousand times worthier than a virtuous man), which stresses the extraordinary preciousness of such piety when it comes to women, because of the manifold difficulties for a Muslim who is also a wife and mother to attain a state of such requisite purity. Purity is a constituent of the male sex as the earliest treatises by Hui scholars, discussed in earlier chapters, sought to demonstrate. Another, more unusual, twist to this evaluation of female spirituality was given in a conversation with a young *ahong* from a county town in Henan who assured us of the authenticity of his version: '*yige qingliangde nuren shengguo yiqian mei jiaomende nanren* (one virtuous woman is a-thousand times worthier than a man who lacks virtue)! In this version the premise of male superiority is loaded so heavily against woman that even the purest female believer may gain the upperhand over man only (the crucial qualifier) if he is without virtue.

These shifting emphases allow for instructive interpretations of common perceptions of the spirituality of women, and men, which are as subtle in their nuances of meaning as they are stark in their implications for persistent gender definitions. Such are the obstacles considered in the way of woman's attainment of purity that if she should raise herself to this level, it is of a quality (made the more precious by its rarity) that it outshines a-thousand-fold the virtue of men

(more ubiquitous, because of his innate, superior *yang)*. Conversely, it could be inferred that the power of faith is held to be such that even when it is attached to a woman, it subjects all around her, including men (although as some narrators maintain, these must be men whose lack of virtue 'feminised' them into a more degrading state). Underlying the discourse is the premise that faith is gendered, woman its symbol – whether in the rarity of its attainment, or in its attendant repercussions for the dominant sexual hierarchy. In its radical overthrow through the raised position of pure women the danger lies revealed for men who fail to be true to their pure *yang* nature. Sin, as early intellectual voices (see Ma Zhu and Liu Zhi in Chapter II.2 in this volume) have already maintained, presages the feminisation (through overabundance of *yin)* of man. All these versions reinforce the central message that women are unlike men and spiritual virtue comes shaped by an entrenched, because natural, gender difference.

The cosmology of orthodox Islam, anchored in the submissiveness of the female sex to secular and sacred pyramidal order (F. Sabbah, 1984), easily coexists with the elevation of a gendered domain of *yang* over the nether regions of *yin*. Centrality of womb and familial identity, essentialised notions of domesticated female nature and the civilising projects as the task of natural masculine spirit and inclinations, circumscribe women within either ideational system. Thus women it seems can neither succeed in conquering their share of Communist Heaven, nor anticipate with much confidence their allotted fate in afterlife. Only the great scholar Ma Zhu offers a glimmer of hope when he asserts that even if the fundamental duties incumbent upon a Muslim had not all been carried out, or been carried out less than perfectly, heaven may still be within the realm of possibility – granted that women practise submissiveness (Ma Zhu, 1988 reprint: 265). In case of doubt, women can always fall back on the hope that service to dutiful wifehood could salvage an otherwise fatal outcome.

The specific historical conditions of the Muslim diaspora in China have structured Hui memory through membership of what could be called a patriline of faith. Its fault-line is gender (see Chapter VIII). The memory of who belongs or does not belong to the ancestry of believers also shapes the Muslim community's perception and evaluation of women's spiritual condition, the nature of remedies and, in turn, their chances for an afterlife in paradise or hell. In Hui stories about the origin of their people during the Tang Dynasty (618–906), Han women are presented to Muslim warriors to induce them to stay in the host country. These women learn to cook and adjust themselves to their husbands' ways of life. When they complain that they were unable to speak the Hui language, they are consoled with the statement that it does not matter

greatly. ‘Eat Hui food; there is no need to listen to Hui words’ (Li Shujiang & Luckert, 1994:249). What is the significance of this story? The Hui language is the language of faith, that is, of the Koran. These women are to all intent and purposes deaf and dumb in the face of the sacred. They are marked for the profane tasks in life, and as not belonging to ‘the true descendants’ of the faith. Another tale often narrated makes feminine beauty manifest itself only in the eyes of the legitimate beholder, the husband (Li Shujiang & Luckert, 1994:337–339; see Chapter IX for a full account of the tale).

Here gender constructs of accommodated and domesticated wives and dutiful mothers function as an integral part of the mapping of an ideal society on the part of what Peteet (1993) calls a besieged resistance culture. Stories narrating women’s lives become ‘commentaries on virtues’ that contribute to the community’s identity and memory, the harder for women to resist and change when faced with communal expectations that loyalty and allegiance to their ethnic group must override any other interest.

Yet additional readings of these tales are possible, suggested by Fatna Sabbah’s interpretation of Muslim ideas of veiled and sheltered female beauty (1984) which are ideals, as Chinese Hui tales suggest, of universal validity. Ideals central also to the Islamic diaspora in China render submissiveness and passivity the qualities most perfectly mirroring the devout Muslim disciple, female and male. In Sabbah’s analysis, the abject worship of the divine, the keystone of the Muslim cultural order, *al-’ibada*, entails abject adherence to authoritative interpretation of Koranic strictures. Thus, innovative approaches to orthodox codes of conduct are *bid’a*, in this context understood to signify aberration, even heresy.

The sacred universe of Islam is constructed in deference to God’s superiority: time and space serve to reveal God the master, the creator. Nothing in this universe can escape a hierarchical creation of specific, gendered relationships of inequality. The order cannot be questioned. ‘The female condition and the male condition are not different in the end to which they are directed, but in the pole around which they orbit. The lives of beings of the male sex revolve around the divine will. The lives of beings of the female sex revolve around the will of believers of the male sex’ (Sabbah, 1984:118).

In the orthodox model, an ‘inversion-linkage’ (Fatna Sabbah) extends the hierarchical relationship between God and believer into the relationship between the sexes. This spiritual ideal and social principle permeates all and everything. Any attempt anywhere, as in women’s questioning of men’s rights over their minds and bodies, must in consequence be seen a subversion of the divine will itself. Sabbah’s analysis explains why women are excluded from participation in

the discourse on the realm of spirituality, of an otherworldly reality, which is entirely the subject matter of orthodoxy. It is situated in 'the realm of power, legitimacy, dominance, and the collectivity' (1984:64) of which the mosque is its most poignant and visible symbol. Women must wait for enlightenment though the offices of their men as, Richard Antoun (1989) for example describes in the case of the Jordanian Muslim communities where imams are wont to intersperse their sermons with exhortations to the male congregation to inform also their 'womenfolk' (not allowed into the mosque) whenever they consider their message of relevance to the female sex.

Against this background, the institutions of *nusi* and *nu ahong* in Chinese Muslim communities become a polysemic symbol of the dynamic of change in religion and its institutions, specifically of women's role in affecting changes in religion which challenge entrenched concepts of power, knowledge, mediation of knowledge, and the relationship between demands for social and for spiritual equality. The presence of a women-centred religious site, or its subsequent loss, also opens up the question for more comprehensive future exploration as to how religious affirmation of the individual engenders in turn expectations for a stronger role for Muslim women in the social and political life of their country.

NUSI: Loss and Absence

The importance of a mosque for women to congregate for learning and worship, for spiritual identification, became particularly apparent to us when the theme of women's absence from collective prayer threaded itself through the interviews and observations among Muslim women (fall 1995 and spring 1996) which we conducted close to the famous Niujie Mosque in Beijing.

Once Muslim women had their own places of prayer. The oldest women's mosque stood in Shouliu Lane, in the neighbourhood of the Niujie Mosque, where in 1922 it opened its gates to worshippers. Subsequently four more women's mosques were established in Beijing; in 1949 in the capital alone, forty-six mosques were counted. In 1956, eighty mosques in all were available to Muslims, among them eighteen women's mosques. The highest number was reached in 1958 with 149 mosques. But the political campaigns which started in the same year also closed, among other mosques, the Shouliu Hutong Women's Mosque. It became a kindergarten, then during the Cultural Revolution a factory and, since 1978, it reverted to its function as a kindergarten for Hui*zu* children.

Not far from the seat of a government pledged to sexual egalitarianism, and not very distant from the opulent headquarters of the All-China Women's Federation, pledged to represent women's rights in all spheres of society, the 43

year old owner of a small kiosk, at the back of the Niujie Mosque, spoke angrily, even bitterly, of the irretrievable loss she and women in the neighbourhood had suffered. The many abortive attempts to petition the authorities for reopening their women's mosques had proven that there was no hope of redress. Where once her mother went to find solace and spiritual peace, where her older sister had gone as a young girl to attend classes taught by the popular Hei *Ahong*, in Arabic language and Islamic knowledge, where she had herself been drawn when only a little girl to marvel at the spacious beauty of the women's mosque, excited at the prospect of soon being able to follow in her older sister's footsteps, now a municipal kindergarten occupies the space. The women's mosque near the Niujie Mosque was closed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) as a relic of 'feudal thought' and old 'superstition' – and it remains closed.

The woman showed her anger, ignoring even a rare customer, by pointing an accusing finger at the nearby seat of the China Islamic Association. Despite the fact that the women repeatedly petitioned the Association, 'they don't want to hear about restoring our mosque to us'. She said, 'when I am old, where will I pray?' When told that the Niujie Mosque leadership claimed that women are willing to worship at home because *tamen dong libai* (they [the women] are knowledgeable enough); that anyway, in case of need, the large state-funded Mosque has set aside a room at the back where between forty to sixty women can, and do, worship, the woman exploded with rage: she is *bu shufu* (not comfortable) in the Mosque. This mosque has never been theirs. It is wrong to believe that women 'understand' their religious duties. They don't, and their ignorance is not a concern which counts with the Islamic Association. Nor are the Mosque elders or any of the four *ahong* unduly perturbed as she sees it (Interview June 1996, Beijing). The women once had their own mosque, but now *tamen bu gei* (they [the authorities] will not hand [the mosque] over to them). Now there are neither women's mosques nor *nu ahong* in Beijing.

'Without such a mosque, without the *nu ahong*, who teaches the women', the informant continued. With women so ignorant, how will the children ever learn? *'Hen kuai wattle* (soon it will all be finished)', she says of her faith. Whereas, once women in this neighbourhood had a mosque which they proudly could claim their own, a *nu ahong* whose learning was a symbol of all women's right to learn, a spiritual home, they now feel alienation. The splendour of the Niujie Mosque to which women are only admitted as a peripheral presence increases their sense of impotence. Their rights are not admitted to constitute legitimate women's rights, since they are part of the religious sphere that is by definition an obstacle to an atheistic definition of women's progress (away from, among others, religious fetters of authority).

Contestations over rights to a place of worship for women, for a women's mosque, therefore are taking place not only in relation to Islamic patriarchal resistance but also to a secular establishment which reacts with ambivalence to prospects of representation of women's claims to equality in a non-secular sphere.

Laying Claim to Paradise

Is Heaven for Muslim women as unattainable as the above analyses and accounts might indicate? Do women need men to mediate on their behalf with God? Female *ahong* at Henan's independent women's mosques speak of women's direct communication with God, without any male intermediary. Du *Ahong* says, it is better, more forceful, if women rely on their own prayer. Women are after all *ziyou* (independent) (interview, October 1996). Guo *Ahong* maintains that God talks directly to women when it comes to important matters. When Adam and Eve grew ashamed of their nakedness after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, it was Eve who received instructions from God, and who in turn informed Adam to cover his '*xiuti'* (shameful nakedness) (interview, October 1996).

Chinese Muslims need women's mosques and *nu ahong*, one can hear repeated often from Shan *Ahong* from the Daxinzhuang Women's Mosque: *Nanren you libai difang, nuren meiyou, shenma daoli*? (When men have their mosque and women haven't, what is the excuse for that?) Not only are these institutions a question of right, but also women would be lost without them, so every *nu ahong* tells us. Women's salvation is the business of women. Only women *ahong* can understand the difficulties women have to contend with, argues Du *Ahong*. And their congregations agree.

Where *ahong* provide an inspiring spiritual leadership, the prayerhalls in *nusi* in Zhengzhou, Qinyang, Zhoukou, Daxinzhuang, and wherever else an *ahong* attracts women through erudition, compassion, charity and purity, are overflowing. Women go to worship because they feel close to the *ahong* who can be sought out for emotional consolation, domestic problems or difficulties of interpretation of Koranic passages. Their mosque, which the believers help to maintain, to which they wander, often daily, for instruction and prayer, for comfort and solace, is infused with an atmosphere of a kind which does not allow for the distancing hierarchy or the deference to religious leaders to occur, something which is a more common feature of men's mosques. Wherever a visitor beholds the sight of women's and men's mosques in close vicinity to each other, the latter nearly always outshines in splendour of architecture and richness of ornamentation and always dominates in size and spaciousness of mosque-

grounds. The more central location of men's mosques (having nearly always historically preceded women's mosques), the extent of donations, the symbolic impact of space to be traversed and halls available for receptions and meetings, all engender an air of formality with its underlying emphasis on the social and spiritual hierarchy of a traditional patriarchal mosque and its *fang* (parish) (see Chapter VII in this volume).

In the light of Western feminist studies of religion, it is interesting to develop the contrast in atmosphere between men's and women's mosques. Virginia Sapiro (1994), summarising findings on the growing impact of female clergy on their churches, notes among other features the effect of women on their congregations: leading to closer spirituality and a greater identification with the church. It is the lower status of a female clergy which is held to lessen the social distance between the holder of the office and her congregation; in turn, the breakdown of gender hierarchy then may lead to a breakdown of institutional hierarchy (Sapiro, 1994:204–205). Similar observations can be made in *nu ahong*-led women's mosques: informality, close relations among mosque elders, *ahong*, and worshippers, familiarity with each other – all these factors contribute to a non-hierarchical, open and kinship-type community.

The spirit of a small women's mosque community is expressed in the use of kinship terminology. In the Xiaolou Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou Guo *Ahong'*s *hailifan*, students of the Koran, girls from the countryside, call her *shifu nainai*, combining their respect for her learning, *shifu*, with intimate form of address for an older woman who is of their grandmothers' generation, *nainai*.

In talking with Zhang *Dajie* (informal and respectful address for an older woman), a 70 year old gatekeeper at the Beida Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou, one hears a voice charged with emotion and great pride. Zhang *Dajie* is happy to serve the *ahong*, the more because her *ahong* is respected in the community for her learning and purity as well as for her independent mind. Zhang *Dajie* identifies completely with the concerns and interests of 'her' mosque and 'her' *ahong* and follows the tense relations with the adjacent men's mosque with closest attention. Her husband is dead, her four children married and preoccupied with their own affairs, and Zhang *Dajie* is content to be independent of them. Now she can turn her full attention to afterlife, reassured by the thought that in this *nusi* all her needs are taken care of. She attends morning classes in Persian and in *libai zhishi* (ritual knowledge) that enable her to join the daily prayer rituals with confidence and enjoyment. Once she was ignorant, she tells me, but now she can turn to Du *Ahong* with all her troubles and uncertainties. She once was petrified by the thought of her fate after death; now she can sleep again calmly. She has never been happier (interview, October 1996).

The smaller size of women's mosques, more cluttered and crowded, more akin to home conditions than a men's mosque, with their familiar faces and trusted social networks, coupled with the lower status of a *nu ahong* and her perceived inferior scholarship (compared to male *ahong)* contribute to a development in which faith is embedded in a social extension of the mundane world in which women live. When women entered male-dominated spheres, they shifted gendered domains of functions and responsibilities in religion, and thus started to break down also some of the distance from their own source of spirituality (Sapiro, 1994:201–205). The role of women *ahong* lies in the facilitation of the relationship between the worshipper and her God rather than a supplanting of this relationship by an elevated ritual leader.

It is now becoming apparent that what developed to maintain a diaspora's separate identity and by necessity coopted women to teach and preserve the spiritual and moral values at the heart of its identity in exile has been undergoing changes, and continues to do so, changes which bear the imprint of women's assertion that their community's quest for identity must incorporate their expectations for participation in this quest.

Dai Jianning speaks of alienation, the psychological impact of Muslim women's absence in collective rituals of prayer in mosques, entirely a male preserve, and remarks on the erasure of the female soul and personae. He also notes a close relationship between, on the one hand, women's nonparticipation in religions organisation, theological debates and interpretations and, on the other hand, women's social subordination (this view is also put forth by Overmeyer in an overview of women's participation in organised religion in China; Daniel Overmeyer, 1991:92–93).

But as our study seeks to demonstrate, self-abnegation and sacrifice are not unchallenged universals in Muslim women's lives. As writers like Chhachhi (1991), Lazreg (1990) and Mehdid (1993), among others have pointed out, in the international arena the perpetuation of homogenised constructs of passive, suffering womanhood whilst serving as a politically convenient hook on which to hang the cardboard pictures of the adversary which Islam has come to constitute in hostile international discourses, simply does not match a much more complex and diverse reality. Not only have the forces of de-colonisation in Muslim countries, political and socioeconomic developments, and indigenous feminist demands and internal change, opened doors to schools for girls and to academic careers for women (Margot Badran, 1991; Laal Jamzadeh & Mills, 1986; Kamalkhani, 1993; Tohidi, 1994; Yazbeck, 1985), but also Chinese Muslim communities, as we have shown, have supported women's education to different degrees and for different purposes. These differences, we have argued,

reflect variously situated interests and challenges which in some areas (as in Northwest and Southwest China) wedge women, tightly and passively, into political and symbolic submission between their community and the state apparatus; in other areas (Central China and areas influenced by its traditions), different constellations of ethnic and religious politics of identity, tradition of religious education and organisation, and environmental and state-managed pressures have engendered a readiness by women to insist on a greater degree of autonomy as a matter of right. Rights less as a matter of intellectual debate and more as an insistence on the Islamic spirit of women's own site of religious life and as a productive *bid'a* (innovation) with which to enrich the Muslim community as a whole.

Part V

Chinese Muslim Women: Communitas, Choices, and Conversion

Chapter XI

Aisha, A Chronicle of Conversion and Collective Survival

In this chapter our discussion shifts to what Gail Hershatter (1997) calls an 'ethno-context' which must be known in order to precede the task of historical reconstruction. That is, how facts, fact-makers, and dominant interpretative voices come to interact and give rise to 'history' in this sensitive 'field of force' of central control and oblique challenge. How the all-pervasive presence of the State apparatus looms over and engenders researchers' consciousness of constraints, of given informants' vulnerability, of the possibility of flexible circumvention but also of the way the ethnographer's presence may become an active, sometimes disruptive, act of intervention. The specific context for this discussion comes from a site visit in October 1995 in a Northwest Hui Muslim community. In the course of a long conversation with the local *ahong*, we were presented an 'internally' (*neibu)* produced documentation, a chronicle of religious conversion (*guiyi*, a religious term denoting initiation, derived from Buddhism) which took place some years previously in this same community. The purpose then is to demonstrate how precarious and, from the fieldworker's vantage point, how arbitrary the evocation, transmission and preservation of a collective memory can be.

In writing history, Joan Wallach Scott (1988) says, we must foreground the textuality of how something is being said, 'the warring forces of significations within the text itself' (quoting Barbara Johnson in Scott, 1988:17). Foregrounding text and textuality serves also the purpose of laying bare the 'discovery' of multiple meanings of the text by the reader/ethnographer which took place over several months subsequent to the first encounter with Aisha's story of conversion. Following the methodology proposed by Scott, it is through identification of uneasy juxtapositions and crosscurrents caused by material either repressed or negated that an 'internal differentiation' renders audible the multivocality of a script. This is to suggest how cautious the 'reading' of such a

document must proceed in the context of a Hui history ‘between resistance and assimilation’ *(kang-tongbua)* to borrow from the work of the Hui Muslim intellectual, Bai Gui (1991; see Jonathan Lipman for an historical background to Han-Muslim conflicts in Northwest China, 1990).

When we probe the place of dissent and difference within an authoritarian framework, and the constraints or appropriation of memory transmission in formulating history, scholarship must be sensitive to how non-official versions may be transcribed and transmitted as ‘secret’ or ‘oppositional’ (see Rubie Watson, 1994). The narrative of the conversion of a young Han woman to Islam, written by and for a small community of believers in Northwest China, was handed to us when we interviewed the *ahong* of a mosque in a town in Ningxia, to underline his much reiterated statement that nothing, nothing at all, could stay in the way of the true faith. Although an internal paper, its cautious style of writing and profuse thanks to the Party for support of revival of religious praxis, had made the transmission of this story through us possible, and desirable.

In our praxis of ethnography, not only historical contextualization and sensitive textual analysis, but also the personal experience as a Western researcher functioning in an intensely closed political and cultural environment have come to define our task of ‘internal differentiation’ of the text, of the process by which as ethnographers we became part of the social relations which were carried by the text as a distinct product of political intentions and circumspect collaboration.

Readings of a Culture of Resistance; The Ethnographic Setting

An indication of the nature of political relations was the local reactions to our ‘interventionist’ presence when we reached the small township of Lingwu on a chilly early autumn night of 1995 (‘we’: a Henanese Hui Muslim, who, because of her education and thus prolonged exposure to a secular ideology, must have seemed an intellectual of equivocal allegiance; the other, a non-Muslim Western researcher).

We had set off on our journey in Yinchuan, Ningxia, and ended it in Xining, Qinghai. In these self-contained worlds of Hui Muslim villages and townships, we found *weiganji* (a sense of crisis over the perceived stagnation of faith), disenchantment among youth, concern among religious leaders over secularisation of traditional Muslim life, ageing of active religious participants, crime rate and economic backwardness, neglect of religious education. However, we were impressed by a systematic and dynamic search for solutions. This quest is often emanating from mosques and *jingxueyuan*, Islamic schools, where

intellectuals collaborate with *ahong* to find means of renewing faith and solidarity. Here the widespread preoccupation with women's education which we found in Ningxia Autonomous Hui Region, and also in Gansu and further north in Inner Mongolia, receives its peculiar context: women educators at the forefront of religious/secular education; women in the vanguard of a more radical approach to missionising; women in the new radicalising Islam, whilst firmly embedded in primary roles as valued and respected helpmates, asked to extend their influence beyond home and courtyard into the community at large (different from the traditionalist *gedimu pai)*.

As soon as we arrived in Lingwu, we notified the authorities as required. Because it was a weekend, we did not seek out Public Security, but contacted the chairperson of the City-Women's Federation Branch to inform her of our presence. But she too was out of town, and all we could do was to leave a message. We proceeded carefully with our work and sought out the *ahong* at the local mosque, Tian *Ahong*. The interview, attended by at least a dozen curious *hailifan*, students of the Koran, went smoothly once our identity was established through the official letter of introduction from the Academy of Social Sciences, and also because of one investigator's identity as Hui and Muslim. During a long conversation, when we were being told about the aridity of faith, the problems of reforming religious education in a secular educational system, a discussion of the role of women in the hoped-for revival of Chinese Islam brought forth the name of Aisha. This was the first time we heard about this local heroine, a young woman *ahong* (trained to teach and lead prayers often but not always at women's mosques) who gained fame and notoriety when she converted to Islam.

Having thus been told about Aisha and given the booklet about her conversion, we were naturally eager to see Tian *Shiniang*, the *Ahong's* wife, who had taught Aisha during the early days. There seemed to be no obstacle. That very evening, led by a young *ahong* and a *hailifan*, we went to Tian *Shiniang*'s home, a medium-sized one-room flat, sparsely furnished but spotlessly clean, in a small grey, concrete residential block situated close to the mosque.

A surprised elderly woman welcomed us and quickly warmed to our presence. She wore a *gaitou*, a head-dress covering hair and neck and reaching down to her shoulders. Small and stout, she generated a lively and spirited atmosphere. We had only just started to explain our backgrounds and purpose of the visit, when we heard approaching steps and the door was flung wide open to admit a middle-aged man, dressed in a plain grey suit. He walked silently and quickly to the chair, which had been as quickly vacated by Tian *Shiniang*, sat down and looked at us. All this happened within seconds. After our initial assumption that a relative had arrived to partake in our exotic presence, because of the informal

manner of entry (no knock on the door, no word of greeting or even a glance in Tian *Shiniang*'s direction), the atmosphere suddenly turned oppressive, and we realised we had understood little of what was taking place.

We all were affected. *Shiniang* was sitting on the bed in a corner of the room, flanked by our two companions. During the whole proceeding they neither stirred nor spoke. It was as if they too were strangers to the room which was filled by the grim presence of what we now realised to be a Public Security officer. The question-and-answer period which followed was still more unsettling because we had been observed and followed when we believed ourselves to be experiencing normality; and because we were followed to the home of Tian *Ahong* whom we thus implicated with our presence. We endured a close examination of our papers and questions as to our purpose which was followed at the end by a lecture on proper procedures. When he eventually left, again without acknowledgement of the inhabitant into whose home he had intruded, he was shadowed by the two young men who whispered earnestly into his ears as they gently shut the door behind them.

We wanted to leave immediately, in order not to create any more problems, but were prevented by *Shiniang*. We were shaking, she was calm. She started to boil water for tea and told us that she knew who among her neighbours had *'zuo baogao'* (reported to Public Security) on her. It has happened before, she reassured us, and it would happen again. We should not be driven away in this inhospitable manner, she insisted, and thus we continued our conversation, but not for long, in order not to upset *Shiniang*. We left Lingwu quickly the next morning. During our remaining hours the small town, which had appeared so calm and uneventful upon our arrival, was now cast in a different light. Our encounter with Public Security had revealed how close to the surface lie the tensions which require such fast official demonstration and reassertion of control. This experience of the tightly controlled religious life of the Hui community transmuted the disclosure of the existence of the Aisha chronicle into a poignant demonstration of an irrepressible, and besieged, presence. 'Having lived compromised lives', Vera Schwarcz notes in her study of repressed alternative histories, 'they have learned to read between the lines, to write between the lines, to live, as it were, between the lines' (1994:47; see also other contributions in the volume edited by Watson).

The ethnographer turned active participant in a demonstration of force of all-pervasive 'microcosms of power' which interpreted the relationship between the official narrative and the submerged texts so as to turn this research into a documentation of repressive controls of alternative lives. In this 'working out of its ground' the evolution of Hui ethnicity, complicated by the contested place of

religious faith in a secular national ideology, allows the ethnographer no simple assumptions regarding the nature and impact of Chinese State hegemony.

The Text

Our reading of the text has been shaped by the following contexts: firstly, as a collective-voice narration embodying ideals and self-definition of a resistance culture; secondly, as a testimony of the triumph of (patriarchally-mediated) religiosity over state-sponsored atheism; thirdly, as a site of contestation over conflicting models of liberated womanhood; and, fourthly, as a document of one woman's agency.

Aisha was born in 1972 in the county of Lingwu in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and given the name of Chunxiang. The daughter of a Han working class family, her mother died early. She entered school in the county town of Lingwu at the age of eight, and only left school when forced by poverty to do so, two years after entering Middle School. It seemed that she was left without prospects. How did she become not only an ordinary *ahmu*, Muslim, but also an *erlin* (advanced student of Islam) and a respected *ahong*?

Doing menial work for the local mosque (she whitewashed walls) brought Aisha into close contact with the Muslim community (the account does not tell us whether this was a chance encounter or, indeed, whether Chunxiang actively sought this opportunity to meet with practising Muslims). She started to read Islamic literature, received instructions from the imam and his wife, and when considered ready, was received into the faith. She overcame opposition from her family but nearly died of starvation so as not to pollute herself with non-*halal* food served in her family. In 1989, with the support of the imam, she travelled to Huhehot in Inner Mongolia to receive instruction in Arabic and religious knowledge, and returned in 1992 to Lingwu, where she was enthusiastically received by the Muslim community. She nowadays instructs young *hailifan* (students of the Koran) and is a celebrated example of successful conversion. Her family refuses to acknowledge her, and she has no permission to enter her natal home. These are the bare bones of the story.

The writer of the text is the *haji* (a Muslim who has undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca) Ma Tingxian, with the *jingming* (religious name) of Dawude (David). Obviously of some means and standing in the local Muslim community, he had been trustworthy enough to be given the sensitive task of documenting Aisha's life: sensitive because keeping a balance was needed between stressing the triumph of such a conversion and yet not invite undesirable attention from official quarters. The author stresses several times the support he received in his

writing from the entire Islamic community which he would have needed to consult throughout the entire process of production. The collective community voice is captured here rather than the voice of a single author.

The narrative is 48 pages long, *neibu* (designated for internal circulation only), and signed by the author in late December 1992. The cover page features an Arabic inscription and the title: *Aisha Chuanqi* (The Legend of Aisha) and the subtitle: 'recording of a young girl's conversion to Islam'. A short foreword explains the extraordinariness of this conversion, from a Han girl to an *ahong*, and is then followed by ten short chapters detailing the progress of the conversion of Chunxiang to Aisha: *jinjiaoqiande xianzhao* (portents prior to religious initiation), *xinlingshangde qidi* (epiphany of the soul), *qingzhenside jianwen* (knowledge of mosques), *jinjiaohoude danwan* (the evening after the initiation), *shenghuoshangde monan* (life's suffering), *tianxia mumin shi yijia* (Muslims are one family under Heaven), *gongfu bu fu youxinren* (labour does not burden those who persevere), *aisha huilaile* (Aisha returns), *aisha huijia tanqin* (Aisha returns to visit her family), *aisha shi damangren* (Aisha is a very busy person).

A short epilogue thanks the Party for its supportive policies and affirms the support of the Muslim community for the principles of socialism. It is worth noting that the organisation of the material, as outline of chapters, makes one interesting dramatic point: only the final three chapter headings give mention of the name of the protagonist, at the point when fully educated as an enlightened Muslim, she returns from Inner Mongolia to her home town. Before that she is only present to demonstrate a process where spirituality leads to entry into mosque life and conflict with secular society for which, however, a supportive Muslim community compensates.

Collective-voice Narration of a Resistance Culture

The great Hui writer Zhang Chengzhi (1991, *Xinling Shi*, History of the Soul), who so movingly documents the lives and spirituality of Hui Muslims in Northwest China (which includes the Hui Autonomous Region in Ningxia Province, Gansu and Qinghai Province), begins an extraordinary narrative with the depiction of a landscape desolate and scarred; home to a people who have for generations endured a heart-wrenching poverty – and an oppression only alleviated by overruling indifference to local needs. Even the night appears to enshroud rather than console its weary inhabitants. Then the lonely observer's gaze is drawn to a single beam of light which escapes from an half-open door – a mosque, where believers begin to assemble as a black night dissolves into the

light of day, to join in the consoling ritual of common worship. Here is a soil, Zhang tells the reader, where little but faith in a divine presence and an ultimate justice can take root.

In reading the chronicle of Aisha as a collective voice-narration, we were influenced in our interpretation of contemporary relations between the Chinese state and the Hui Muslim population by the work of Stevan Harrell and Dru Gladney. But we have also gained crucially from Julie Peteet's work and Rey Chow's analysis. In the framework developed by the anthropologist Stevan Harrell (1996), the 'Centre', the Han State, is engaged in an all-engulfing 'civilising' project in terms of which the fifty-six officially designated minorities (to which Harrell refers as 'peripheral people') are ranked hierarchically, in accordance with the distance from, or closeness to, the Centre's defining criteria of civilised society.

Arguing the inadequacy of both Marxist-Stalinist and Western models of ethnicity, Dru Gladney defines Hui Muslim identity 'as a dialogical interaction of shared traditions of descent with socio-political contexts, constantly negotiated in each political – economic setting' (1994:114). This dialogic process is played out in different contexts of Hui Muslim and Han relations which reflects not only the important diversity of the Muslim community in China but also the State's varying degrees of intervention to ensure maintenance of a political status quo (also see Gladney, 1991, 1995).

Julie Peteet's work (influenced by Mina Davis Caulfield) foregrounds the concept of 'culture of resistance' to analyse societies that strive for autonomy disempowered by dominant larger systems. She suggests, relevant to our analysis, that such societies derive group identity through the reinvention of its idealised, suppressed culture in significant narrations of golden age and enduring presence despite enforced absence from official historiography. Story-telling thus acquires significance as a vehicle of cultural expressions of resistance and 'objectification' of idealised collective visions of self-definition (1993). Whilst Peteet's context for resistance culture is the specific post-colonial world of Arab Muslim countries, the position Muslim communities find themselves in China, their political powerlessness and yet ideological valorisation as part of the one Party-Government's systematic and all-pervasive projection of peaceful multi-culturalism, suggests the importance we must also attach to the process of defensive reinvention of an ideal Muslim culture by a self-conscious diaspora.

Rey Chow best articulates this dynamic when she says that 'Ethnicity signifies the social experience which is not completed once and for all but which is constituted by a continual, often conflictual, working-out of its grounds' (1993:143).

What do we read?

Although the text makes emphatically clear that Chunxiang was chosen by God through distinctive and unmistakable divine interventions (see below), her 'natural' inclination towards God was given reinforcement in the contacts with the Muslim community in Lingwu.

Manifestations of faith daily enacted at the local mosque moved the young girl. She remarks through the voice of the narrator on how dutifully ritual guidelines are adhered to; she marvels at the harmony, solidarity and the unison of purpose which moves and structures mosque congregations in their daily enactment of prayer. The believers' faith in the meaningfulness of their action is stressed repeatedly. Implied is the absence of such purposefulness, of such dedication and harmony in the society of which Chunxiang was a member.

When Aisha travels, for the first time, at the age of sixteen (at this age, legally entitled to choose her religion), beyond the boundaries of her hometown, to Huhehot in Inner Mongolia, her vulnerable state (by herself, faced with unknown prospects and what must have been anxious thoughts over the welcome she could expect as a total and dependent stranger) better demonstrates the reassuring existence of a tightly-knit Muslim community that extends far and wide. Once it is ascertained that the bounds of legality are not violated by Aisha's departure from her home town, which happened without the knowledge of her family, Tian *Ahong*, who is depicted as carefully and thoughtfully deliberating the interest of his charge, initiates communication with the Xincheng Women's Mosque in Huhehot. In Huhehot, a generous community of Muslims welcomes Aisha, moved by Tian *Ahong's* letter of introduction into taking her into their midst, housing and feeding her, providing the newcomer to Islam with needful instruction and counsel. Aisha studies at the Xincheng Women's Mosque and at the Qixia Yingzi Mosque's Women's School, on the outskirts of Huhehot, for three years to become knowledgeable in the study of scriptures and also in rudimentary Arabic. Her fees are paid for by the local Muslim community, and the mosque elder Zhang Fuen and his wife take her into their family and provide for her daily needs.

When we learn about the decisions that were made over Aisha's course of religious education, her program of learning, about the management of non-Muslim society over sensitivities associated with the conversion of a Han person to Islam, and so on, we also learn about a distinct sexual hierarchy in place. The decision-makers are men, male *ahong*. Their helpmates are wives *(shiniang)*, women teachers (*jiaozhang)* and sympathetic women from the community of Muslim: wiping Aisha's tears, lending their shoulders when she is in distress, instructing her in rudimentary Arabic and ritual knowledge, and providing moral

support and counsel. The division of labour and lines of authority are clearly demarcated in a sexual order of patriarchal characteristics which is at the same time inextricably linked to a symbolic universe of deference and submission to the divine will (see Sabbah, 1984; Mernissi, 1991). It might seem from Aisha's point of view, she has chosen to replace one paternalistic regime with another; effective, efficient, caring and transformative where the Party no longer fills the personal and social void. But pertinent for this aspect of the analysis, the description of Muslims, whether in Lingwu or in Huhehot, as 'one family under Heaven' and Aisha's joy of being granted access to this support, warmth, faith and unstinting generosity, can be said to derive its poignant meaning only from the lack, the absence and void which characterises the social reality from which Aisha escaped with so much courage and unwavering faith. The sociologists Greil and Rudy note that where 'conversion involves a radical transformation of social roles and where conversion involves the sacrifice of social respectability' (quoted by Robbins, 1992:82), affective bonds operate as 'neutralisers' of extra-group ties. The 'social cocoon' created by the religious community generates an effective 'boundary control' between members and non-members of the religious community (Robbins, 1992:83) which was in Aisha's case reinforced by Islamic ritual and dietary stipulations.

Triumph of Religiosity over State-sponsored Atheism

The narrator, Ma Tingxian, is emphatic on what makes this conversion stand out from others. It was not caused by more common factors, he explains, such as marriage to a Muslim, or an emotional vacuum. What is so poignant, according to Ma, is that the Han girl Chunxiang became the Muslim Aisha because of *fazi neixin* (a faith springing from within); and thus *shi wei xinyang er xinjiao* (out of faith sprang *yimani*, belief in Islam; Ma, 1992:2).

Aisha's story is depicted in the occurrence of signs which followed her throughout childhood. Or in the language of the chronicler, Allah planted early seeds in an immature soul to allow it to ripen later into *yimani* (faith): in her twelfth year she dreamt that red stars fell from heaven and entered her heart. Whenever she looked at sculptures in Buddhist temples, to which she was forced to go, *fangan* (disgust) overcame her; in the end she refused to go to Temple Fairs to pray. She developed early in life a natural inclination to be with Hui children. When a child, she recognised the presence of an *ahong* and addressed him as such, although no one had taught her about such a station and a form of address (Ma, 1992:4–5).

The chronicler is at pains to point out that it was Chunxiang who, propelled by

her faith, sought out spiritual leaders from the local mosque, the Xiancheng *Qing Da Si*. Under the guidance of Tian *Ahong*, his wife, Tian *Shiniang*, undertook the instruction of the girl. Tian *Ahong* called upon *Ahong Nainai* (address for *ahong'*s wife if of an older generation): 'first instruct her in performing the small and big ablutions, then teach her to speak the 'religious core professions (*qingzhenyan*)' (Ibid: 20). Thus she became familiar with rituals of cleansing and she learnt how to voice the core profession of Islamic faith: 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet'.

After the successful completion of this elementary introduction at Tian *Shiniang's* house, she was given the *jingirting* of Aisha, named after the youngest and most influential wife of the Prophet who is revered by Chinese Muslims as 'the mother of the Muslim people' (Ma, 1992:21). Tian *Ahong* continued to instruct Aisha in the faith, which most importantly is constituted of the belief of Allah, the angels, the Koran, the Prophet's role in the revelation, the belief in afterlife, in pre-ordained fate (*qianding*, Allah's plan for his creation) and in the five duties *(wu da gongke)*, consisting in faith in God and His Prophet, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and, if possible, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The evening of the day on which she was initiated at the mosque into Islam, Aisha conscientiously performed the rituals of ablution, following the Ahong's prayer during worship. Her softened and beautiful facial expression, so the account tells us, spoke of the great event that had taken place. She prayed:

> Allah! be my God! All-merciful God,
> Your Muslim child Aisha calls upon You
> Blessed and Endowed by You
> Today I became Your new Muslim.
> Allah!
> I beg you, keep me in Your Sight,
> Give me strength
> Have pity on me, shield me [from harm]
> So that I may become a true Muslim (Ibid: 27).

Islamic knowledge is depicted as containing a transformative agent; sacred to Muslims, thus in need of protection; 'poisonous' to non-believers, thus to be guarded against. Transgression of this boundary changes the transgressor for ever and invites structural tension (Mary Douglas, 1970). The journey which led to Aisha's state of true Muslimhood began when she was given a small book to read (*Ta, wei shenma xinyangle yiselanjiao*? 'Why did she come to believe in Islam?') and told by an old Muslim to take care to keep it from contact with objects in her father's household. The 'contaminating' quality was also recognised by her father when he accused Aisha of imbibing 'poison' (*jiushi you*

du, bu neng kan). Aisha took this ‘poison’ again and recognised its ‘truth’ (*zbengque*). She had made the fatal step, and crossed the boundaries into a world sacred and life-giving to the believer, dangerous, even life-threatening (understood as a life socially constructed), to the members of her father’s world of Han tradition and Party secularity.

The Test

In the wake of Aisha’s initiation into the faith, the gulf between her family’s life (Han people’s life-style) and her own chosen path widened continually. The purity of her faith had to be defended, most importantly, through observing food taboos (eating *qingzben, halal* food) and through rejection of rites of ancestral worship and Confucian notions of filial piety. She was cursed by her family and friends for *dang huimin* (for having turned into a Hui, that is, a double connotation of ethnic status and religious identity) and foregoing the rites of her forefathers for a ‘cloth coffin’ (a reference to Muslim burial practice where cloth instead of a coffin covers the corpse). But she preferred to starve herself rather than pollute *yimani*, faith, and in this she was helped by a Hui restaurant owner for whom she worked to obtain *halal* food. When her father prohibited her from working outside the home, she nearly died of starvation.

She was saved from martyrdom by the timely intervention of Tian *Ahong* and his wife and the opportunity to study the Koran at the far-away Islamic school in Huhehot. Upon her return to Lingwu, after successful completion of her studies and when certified as an *ahong*, she again showed her *yimani* when refusing to weep and sob loudly as was the custom for a filial child as her father lay seriously ill. She asked for his forgiveness, but her most urgently felt sentiment was not to *‘shang wode yimani’* (hurt my faith); and to convert her father before his death (Ibid: 44) News about her family was circulating in the early summer of 1996, when Kang *Laoshi* told of continued refusal by the family to acknowledge the conversion of their daughter and sister. Aisha, in 1996 an *ahong* and teacher in her own right, continues to support her father financially, but the money is placed outside his door as she is refused the right of entry into her natal home (Interviews, June 1996 in Huhehot).

Conflicting Models of Liberated Womanhood

Gender constructs are an integral part of this assertive process of imagining which Peteet, following Caulfied, terms cultural resistance. Stories about women’s lives become ‘commentaries on virtues’ embodying the ideal culture (Peteet, 1993). Women thus are central to the preservation of the idealised

culture (through education and inculcation) but such culture must also be protected against women (through their exclusion from religious and political positions of authority). Such a point was also made by Mervat Hatem (1993) and Valentine Moghadam (1994), among others, in their respective work on the place of women in nationalist discourses of postcolonial Muslim societies. This ambivalence at the heart of women's treatment, however important, cannot be drawn out in this chapter (see Chapter VIII). Important here is another implication of the role of women as bearers of cultural values. As Stevan Harrell points out in the aforementioned theory of the Han state's treatment of minorities as a 'civilising' project, women occupy important functions as metaphorical markers of the Centre's superior civilisation. Implicit in the narration of the dramatic progress from Han girl Chunxiang to the Hui Muslim Aisha is the subversion of the dominance of a Communist Party-derived sole paradigm of ideal womanhood.

Reading the transformation of Chunxiang, spiritually and socially adrift, into Aisha, replete with faith and social satisfaction, within a context of the Communist Party's long-standing women's rights policies and programmes, a contrastive and subversive statement emerges which gives the quality of learning, knowledge, self-confidence, personhood and career to the Muslim woman rather than to her former identity as the daughter of a Han family and member of a self-consciously atheistic society. Useful here is the sociological concept of 'structural availability' (Robbins, 1992:85) whereby Aisha's alienation from her native environment can be understood as a vital factor in facilitating her attraction to a community which held out the promise of emotional support and a purposeful life.

A chronicle of divine intervention began with Chunxiang's withdrawal from the life of impurity and spiritual aridity to the world of purity, *qingzhen*, and religiosity. But it is also to be read as an account of a transformation which sees Aisha acquire knowledge and status resulting from relatively superior learning in her present sphere of life. It highlights the national place of the Xincheng Women's Mosque, situated in the Hui quarter of Huhehot, which rendered such an important contribution to Aisha's religious progress. Since the 1980s, the Mosque has played an increasingly prominent role in women's education, education of prospective *nu ahong* or women teachers in religious studies from provinces as remote as Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shandong, Henan, and even further South, as well as from Mongolia itself. The education shapes a model of womanhood in which knowledgeable and enlightened Muslim women glory in mother-and-wife-hood and in which their double burden of domestic and social contributions become sources of strength more than matching that of men.

Women are equal in respect due them by society. But this equality is complementary rather than defined in absolute terms. Women take on society's problems and needs without shifting their primary assigned station inside the family (interviews with the current head of the Mosque school, Kang *Laoshi*, and her *hailifan*, in June 1996).

Aisha's conversion is characterised by several dramatic shifts and passages. Formerly half-orphaned and (it is suggested) treated negligently, she is adopted into a Muslim family as their fourth daughter. Formerly without a social purpose (she left school early, worked in restaurants and as a house-painter, and in the field) she acquired new purpose. She was given the opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of her faith and to carve out for herself a career as a teacher of Islamic knowledge and as an *ahong*, attached to the Lingwu Mosque. From a status of a non-person, she progressed to become an outstanding member of the religious community, celebrated for her single-minded dedication to Islam, her courage and faith in the face of familial and social opposition and physical hardship. In these narrations, liminality engenders elevation of spirit and status and thus contains a powerful challenge to the monopoly of the Communist Party over nature and means of gender liberation.

Collective Strategies of Survival and Individual Choice

Our reading of the story of Aisha so far has been of a collectively narrated triumph of Islamic faith by which a severely bounded, peripheralized community of Hui Muslim represents itself through the conversion of one woman, as God's chosen community (through signs and portents); as practising an ethical code superior to indigenous Confucian values (which are mostly noticeable by their absence); as filling a social void which, it is implied, is the harvest of Communist Party rule of society; as a community of God's creatures propelled by commonly-held faith, purposefulness, and thus in harmony with each other; by dedication, determination and a spirit of sacrifice. The heroic legend of a vulnerable young woman's battle with the overpowering forces of society becomes a metaphor for the triumph of an embattled ethnic and religious minority over overpowering odds posed by Communist atheism, Han superiority, and political centralism.

We understand this narrative to function most importantly as a symbol of the universality of Islamic faith and, therefore, of its transcendence of a dominant matrix of political power and cultural hegemony in China in which Otherness is bounded legally, culturally, spatially and temporally. Read from such a perspective, the legend of one woman's conversion can be conceived as a

dramatisation of a collective experience of elevation whereby ‘conversion’, thus functioning as a polysemic symbol, suggests in our interpretation the transformation, actual and imagined, and even subversion, of multiple and contested realities. It also suggests how a collective, and besieged, memory is enabled and nourished by poignant evocations of the superiority of faith over adversity.

However, to what extent may we also uncover a document of one woman’s agency? In the pursuit of this question, we turn to Aisha’s role beyond an effective demonstration of women’s function as metaphorical markers of relative collective status; we ask whether and how the individual story of one woman’s passage from a Han non-believer to a *biaozhunde hui guniang* (a perfect female Hui believer), with its dramatisation of ennui, rupture, enlightenment, and tests of faith, may be read as a story of personal motivation and agency. Using Victor Turner’s (1967, 1978) understanding of human reality and spiritual journey as drama, with its engendering of liminality or ‘suspension’ of social and normative structures, such a framework suggests a radical shifting of existential ground and transformation of social roles that are the result of such reversal or elevation.

Caroline Walker Bynum (1991) has influenced our thinking as has Elizabeth Croll (1994). Bynum critiques Turner’s theory in her influential work *Fragmentation and Redemption* as gender-biased and argues, on the basis of a woman-centred analysis of narratives of female conversions in medieval Europe, that female lives are less processual than male lives, more characteristic of continuity, reflecting contrasting, gender-anchored lifecycles. Narratives of liminal female states and conversions are thus in terms of Bynum’s analysis symbolic of liminal trajectories engendered by male life-cycles. The subaltern speaks only as liminal for men.

This is a hermeneutic perspective shared by Elizabeth Croll (1994). Speaking in a different investigative context of modern Chinese women’s history, Croll notes that Chinese women’s failure to conquer Half of Heaven may be rooted in their enduring structural confinement within the traditional female life-cycle. Rural women’s lives are still structured by continuity, she suggests, and their eruptions into public visibility and participation may be more a product of a normative, ideological rather than of an actualised, political reality. In this reading, women thus turn into the ‘boundary-subject’ of Julia Kristeva’s (1993) interpretative gaze; drawn by biological forces that assign to their bodies the site of the species, chained to home and native soil, and governed by an ideology of origin rather than choice.

Do men overwrite and distort women, whether we think of them as symbols or historical figures, in processing them through what is essentially the ‘male’ life-

cycle, thus submerging from view women's continued subaltern status? We see in Aisha's text both drama and continuity, reflecting the multiple levels at which the text needs reading. That it is necessary to problematize how ethnicity and gender complicate each other in order to ascertain the singularities of meanings which reside in the intersections of collective and individual biography.

To what extent can this dramatic and triumphant account of a young woman's conversion be interpreted as documenting the place of agency in actual female lives? Here we return to Caroline Walker Bynum's disagreement with Turner over actualised transformation of female convert's lives.

It is our claim that we discover continuity (involving relocation of the locus of patriarchal authority rather than its erasure) and rupture in this document. Bynum makes the point that if we stand with the male narrator, social drama is everywhere (1991:39). If we shift to assume a perspective granted by women's positionality, we are struck by the persisting feature of women's lives as dependent and guided. Chunxiang, the daughter, becomes Aisha, the spiritual ward, the pupil, the adoptive daughter, the young *ahong* who, an interview with her former teacher and classmates in Huhehot in 1996 suggests, is treated with some condescension by her fellow-believers because of the many years in which she lived as a non-Muslim.

But while the background of Aisha attests to the relevance of a notion such as 'structural availability' to explain certain aspects of her conversion, sociologists also caution of overextending the use of such a concept. Thus Robbins warns that it must not become a substitute 'for analysis of meaningful motivation and predisposition' (Robbins, 1992:87).

Chunxiang chose to become a disobedient and unfilial daughter to her father; she chose her faith and nearly died of starvation; she endured her family's and neighbour's contempt because she turned a *huimin* (an equation of Muslim with Hui status). The source of this agency is her faith which gave her the strength to burst the norms of her society in which Hui ethnicity in the Northwest political culture of China is tightly bound and ranked and inferior (in terms of Harrell's model of a centred civilisation and multiple, graded peripheries). To understand the place of agency, considerations of the place and function of gender in both Han/Confucian society and a conservative and closed, because defensive, Muslim society in Ningxia, and in their interaction, must be complicated by ethnic discourse. While the former may connote the continuity Walker Bynum notes in her study of narrations of female conversions, the latter brought to the life of Aisha the dramatic severance and reversal of status from which she emerged both as transcending previous limitations and as endowed with a voice as an instrument of on-going self-definition. We suggest that we hear Aisha's

voice because her quest overlaps with the quest of a community she joins for transcendence.

Chapter XII

Lives and Testimonies: Living in God's Shadow

Yang Huizhen *Ahong*, Social Activist in Zhejiang[1]

About 55 years ago, the first Muslim woman *jiaozhang* (teacher) arrived in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province. A signboard was put up at the gate of the Mosque declaring *Qingzben Nuxne* (Islamic School for Women) to be open.

By then, the Anti-Japanese resistance was under way. The Chinese people faced a hard time and refugees from the North poured into Jiaxing every day. Besides taking charge of religious affairs in the women's mosque, the kind *nu jiaozhang* also organised an 'Association of Widows' in her mosque, sheltering and providing relief to many poor orphans or aged widows. In the period between 1946 to 1949, she put her religious duties aside and devoted herself whole-heartedly to charity and public welfare for the poor. She set up a *Huijiao* (Muslim) Welfare Centre and started an *yixue* (charitable primary school attached to the Centre). The Centre once took in and cared for over a hundred people, mostly the old and weak, women and children which drew attention from the local government and the All-China *Huijiao* [Islamic] Association (ACHA), ultimately gaining their approval. Praise and expressions of admiration also came from ordinary people. This charitable organisation contributed much to Muslim philanthropy and welfare in Jiaxing. Its achievement was extraordinarily rare in the Chinese Muslim milieu, for it was done in a period when women were considered inferior. The person responsible for all this was a woman social activist named Yang Huizhen.

Yang Huizhen, of Hui*zu* nationality, was born in Zhoukou, Henan Province. Her father's family name was Wang, so her maiden name was Wang Rong. Her father received his education in the *sishu* (the old-style private school), and he immersed himself in Chinese culture. He started teaching his daughter at an early age how to read and write, and she developed a good style of writing. Her husband, Yang Fengxiang, also a Huizw, was from Kaifeng, Henan. The Yang family had operated pawn shops in Kaifeng and was very rich for a time.

Unfortunately, Yang Fengxiang became addicted to opium and there was no way to stop him. When the family lost its fortune, they moved to Shanghai. Wang Rong, named Yang Huizhen after her marriage, gave birth to a daughter who died young of illness. Seeing no way to cure her drug-addicted husband and save the broken family, she turned to religion.

Yang Huizhen now decided to become a *hailifan* to study the Koran. Her earlier time in Kaifeng must have been a factor in her decision. At that time, *nuxue* [in Kaifeng some *nusi*, women's mosques, retained the old name of *nuxue*, a religious school for women] were numerous in Kaifeng. These schools provided the training for *nu ahong* and most *hailifan* were widows or the wife of an *ahong*. Yet, there is no proof that Yang Huizhen ever studied at a *nuxue* in Kaifeng. In Shanghai, however, she did learn to recite the scriptures from Mai Junsan *Ahong*. Mai Junsan (1888–1967) was an experienced Islamic teacher whose mastery of reciting the scriptures was unrivalled. This well-known Shanghai *ahong* had gone on numerous lecture trips to Xian, Luoyang, Zhengzhou, Kaifeng and Shanghai. Wherever he went, he would put up a curtain [to enable also women to listen] in a mosque and then proceed to deliver his lecture. Being literate in Chinese, Yang Huizhen found it easier to study the Koran, making speedy progress under Mai's tuition. Mai *Ahong* and other Muslims often praised her for her academic achievements. When Muslims in Jiaxing, a county bordering Shanghai, learned about Yang Huizhen, they immediately invited her to become their first female teacher at the women's mosque.

By then, Jiaxing had a Hui population of no more than 500, the great majority having moved from Shangqiu and Zhoukou prefectures in Henan Province. These immigrants brought the custom of building women's mosque, then popular in their hometown, to their new settlement. The *nusi* was a small building next door to the men's mosque. In the mosque, three rooms had been set aside where women Muslims performed their religious ablutions before worship. Yang Huizhen lived on the top floor of the building. Muslims generally called her Yang *Shiniang* (wife of Yang *Ahong)* or *Yang Ahong*, another traditional address. When talking with non-Muslims, she was referred to as Yang *Jiaozhang*, Teacher Yang. Yuan Xiuying recalls that once Yang *Ahong* told her not to call her Yang *Shiniang*. Yang said: 'He [meaning her husband] is not an *ahong*, Why call me Yang *Shiniang*? Call me Wang *Ahong* [by her maiden name]'. But most people still called her Yang *Ahong* rather than Wang *Ahong*.

Yang Huizhen was appointed *jiaozhang* in Jiaxing around 1942 for the duration of a normal three years tenure. When she took office, a welcoming banquet was held in her honour. Generally speaking, a *nu ahong*'s main duties

consisted in teaching Muslim women a deeper knowledge of Islam and in directing their religious life in the Muslim community. Yang Huizhen never enrolled any *hailifan* (students of the Koran), or established any formal scripture schools or universities. Her major interest was in teaching women the Arabic alphabet, the most important *sura* from the Koran, and ritual language. A score of women came to worship frequently, and eight women assembled regularly to learn to recite the scriptures from Yang *Ahong*. Those who came regularly and worked hard learned by heart the most frequently used 18 *sura*. Some of our informants, among them Yuan Xiuqing, Yuan Xiuying, and Han Abao, who think of themselves as Yang's students, and who called her 'teacher' or 'master', were able to read and understand some of the basic religious texts.

A *nusi* was generally attached to a men's mosque, and a *nu ahong* was supposed to be confined to the mosque grounds and cut herself off from the outside world. However, under the influence of the new cultural movement [launched by Muslim intellectuals to reform and modernise religious education, see Chapter IV], Yang Huizhen often visited the poor, and even taught religious knowledge in some Muslim homes. When Hui*zu* orphans and widows fled to Jiaxing to escape the war and poverty, Yang helped the refugees, housing homeless orphans and widows in the women's mosque and setting up the 'Muslim Women's Association for the Widowed and Orphaned'. 'During the Anti-Japanese War, she once took in 50 Hui refugees who were either elderly, widowed, orphaned or disabled [Jiaxing City Assembly, letter dated 19 December 1948]', which testified to her great talent for organising effectively on behalf of others. She also collected donations and asked for subsidies from the local government on behalf of the Muslim Women's Association for the Widowed and Orphaned. Yang Huizhen won trust, and fame, among the poor Hui people in Jiaxing by actively working for the public good. More than three years had passed since Yang had been made *nu jiaozhang* and much happened during that period in her personal life. When her opium-addicted husband died, Yang adopted a boy from the Jiaxing Orphanage and named him Yang Qinglian.

Over time, Yang Huizhen's relations with the leadership of the men's mosque and with the community elders deteriorated, ending with the termination of Yang's contract. On 11 August 1946, Yang Jinhua, Chairman of the ACHA, Zhejiang Jiaxing Branch, wrote a report to Mr. Hu, then county magistrate of Jiaxing:

> Our investigation proves that the former *jiaozhang* Yang Huizhen is now no longer under contract and ought to move out of the mosque immediately. However, Yang refused to return the house although the mosque is badly in need of it. What is more, when she set up a Women's Association for the

> Muslim Widowed and Orphaned, she neither informed us (the Jiaxing Branch) beforehand nor reported to the local government as required. According to Article 1, Section 2, of the provisional code of conduct issued by the ACHA, any activities initiated in counties where a Branch is in existence, should be organised in the name of the Association only, no other institutions are allowed to be established. Yang Huizhen ignored the regulations, and what she has done is obviously illegal. She has lobbied every where and made derogatory comments about the Jiaxing Branch so as to cover up her own faults and misdeeds. To show its full sympathy with the Muslim poor, the Jiaxing *Huijiao* Branch has decided to make allowance for one or two of the homeless who are occupying rooms in the women's mosque, and see to it that they are provided with a new dwelling place. Now that the Jiaxing Branch together with responsible local people has taken back the mosque property, the house will be repaired for religious service. Considering Yang Huizhen's illegal activities, we decide to expel her from the Association and report her to the All-China *Huijiao* Association as a matter of record. We think it is necessary to also report this to you.

Nu Ahong and Social Activist

Though frustrated, Yang Huizhen did not give in. Instead, she engaged herself in charities with greater enthusiasm and dedication. She left the women's mosque in July 1946 and took all the refugees with her, immediately setting up a *Huijiao* Jiaoyangsuo (House of Refuge and Relief for Muslims) in a rented building at No. 43, Hedong Street, in the Southgate (Hui*zu*) district of Jiaxing. As a female Muslim, Yang Huizhen experienced unimaginable adversities while engaged in charity and relief activities in the war [the civil war between Communist and Nationalist forces continued until 1949]. She went to mosques in Nanjing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, soliciting Hui communities for donations; she applied for relief to the provincial and county administrations. Due to her untiring work, the House operated efficiently, and the number of refugees cared for increased steadily over time. Subsequently Yang Huizhen reported her work to the ACHA, asking for permission to enlarge the House and to transfer its management back into the hands of the ACHA. The ACHA responded immediately.

An official letter from Bai Chongxi, Chairman of the ACHA was sent to the administration of Jiaxing County on 13 June 1947, stating:

> Yang Huizhen, who is in charge of the *Huijiao* Jiaoyangsuo in Jiaxing, has applied to enlarge the House and to get it transferred to be administered by

> the ACHA. Our investigation shows that the House has provided boarding for the disabled, the poor, the widowed and the orphaned. Targeting and helping people in need, the House is indeed doing charitable work. Of course, we should support their applications. I shall be appointing Sha Sailan to head the project and prepare for its enlargement. This letter asks of you to help its work and assist the people in need.

According to the files, Sha Sailan never arrived to fill the office. What became subsequently known as the *Huijiao* Jiaoyangyuan, or the *Huijiao* Jiujiyuan (HJY, Muslim Emergency Refuge), was throughout its existence under Yang Huizhen's leadership. In annual reports and official letters written on behalf of the Refuge, Yang Huizhen signed her name under such titles as Acting Chair or Director.

By June 1947, the HJY had taken in about eighty people. According to the statistics offered by the Refuge, the refugees consisted of thirty-three males: one aged eighty, another fifty, the others between two and fourteen; of the forty-one females, seventeen were aged between forty-six and eighty, one was thirty-one, and twenty-three females between two and sixteen; thirteen of the youngsters were orphans, forty-nine were extremely poor, two were disabled (one blind). Also five widows and two old women were among the group. Fifty of the refugees were from Henan, twenty from Zhejiang. Most refugees were of Hui nationality, only a few were Han. Actually, those from Henan were mostly Hui, while those from Zhejiang were mainly Han nationality. The Refuge employed ten staff.

In 1947, Yang Huizhen also set up a charity primary school attached to the HJY. According to Yang, it 'enrols forty-four pupils from families which cannot afford to send their children to school. Two teachers have been hired. The school is set in the grounds of the Jiangsheng Primary School, at Southeast Huancheng Street, near the Eastgate District. The school building is in good condition, and the playground, teaching instruments, desks and chairs are generally quite satisfactory'. Among the teachers were Miss Li, Weng, Sun, and Shi. Some were Hui, others were Han. They 'teach [the children] to read and write in Chinese'. Yang Huizhen came often to teach the children a rudimentary understanding of the Islamic religion. All the pupils wore the same school uniform which had been donated.

The Refuge often found itself frustrated economically. 'Now that we are suffering from temporary shortages, everything is expensive, and the refugees are threatened with hunger.' Yang continues: 'There is such shortage of fund that we simply cannot keep going, what's more, the refugees are faced with an immediate prospect of no food (Jiaxing Branch of ACHA, letter dated 7 June 1948)'. Yang Huizhen called on people to offer help: 'These people, who have

no food or clothes, are suffering untold miseries in this freezing cold weather. You all carry the responsibility of this enormous task of promoting the [Islamic] religion, building the country, and relieving as many people in need as possible. Now I am again begging for your compassion on behalf of the helpless poor, please be kind enough to inform the Winter Relief Association of our frustration, and ask them to bestow their kindness on those who are lingering on in a steadily worsening situation and supply us with some relief. Your kindness as our benefactors will be appreciated and remembered forever'. Yang Huizhen had worked hard, doing all she could for the existence and development of the Refuge, often going out personally to raise money. She applied for relief funds and materials from the Zhejiang*sheng* Shanhou Jiuji Zongshu (General Bureau for Emergency Relief in Zhejiang Province), the Jiaxing*xian* Zhengfu Dongli Jiuji Weiyuanhui (Committee for Winter Relief organised by Jiaxing County Administration), and the Jiaxing*xian* Zhengfu Shehui Jiuji Shiyeke (Social Relief Section under Jiaxing County Administration). Time and again, she asked the ACHA, and its Branch in Jiaxing, and the County Assembly, to urge the departments concerned at both the provincial and city levels, to give assistance to the House. However, her applications were not always accepted. For example, a response from the County Head of Jiaxing to 'Yang Huizhen at the Charity Primary School,' on 2 February 1948 declared that 'the money and goods collected by the County Committee for the Winter Relief have already been allocated and there is no change, so we cannot accept your application'. Then, on 19 November 1948, Department Three of Jiaxing County Administration sent an official letter in response to the Refuge's application for monthly relief.

> Firstly, there is no subsidy; secondly, we plan to follow the old rule and treat yours like the other schools for refugees [these schools were run by the Nationalist Government during and after the Anti-Japanese war and subsidised by international funds] and have written to all the departments and organisations in the County to include your Refuge for relief action; thirdly, we shall ask the Social Department to supply you urgently with some winter clothes if it is at all possible.

Besides trying to get relief from outside sources, Yang Huizhen also organised the refugees to rely on their own efforts. In 1948, she sent for three rope-making machines from the Jiaxing United Co-operative, and arranged for those in comparatively good health to make ropes. The machines were operated in the rented house at Number 43 Hedong Street, near the Southgate District. Yang Huizhen made herself responsible for the sale of the product. The rope production went on for nearly two years and, to some extent, helped to relieve their funding shortage. The project expanded because of Yang Huizhen's hard

work: an office was set up in a house at Number 70 Hedong Street, its attached school was located on the grounds of the Jiansheng Primary School, the rope production was carried out in Hedong Street, while a house with two rooms on the Ganhe river front was sheltering homeless people. By February 1949, the Refuge had taken in fifty orphans and 116 refugees (Jiaxing HJY, letter dated 7 February 1949), including twenty-seven children, twenty-one men, fifty women and nine elderly or frail persons (Jiaxing HJY, letters dated 4 and 7 February 1949).

From Expulsion to Rehabilitation

Though Yang Huizhen was expelled from the mosque and her membership of the ACHA had been taken away forcibly in 1946, she attended the second Membership Conference organised by the Jiaxing Branch of the ACHA in Zhejiang the following year, on 29 June 1947, as one of the two women representatives present. Her disputes and disagreements with the Jiaxing Branch of the ACHA were a thing of the past. The Jiaxing Branch wrote a letter to Mr. Pan, head of Jiaxing County, describing Yang's Refuge as 'one that is devoted to the public good and achieved a great deal. What it has claimed in its reports is true. We think it necessary to send you a copy of the application for funding for your approval. The director of the Refuge has recounted in detail the adversities they suffered. Your kindness will be remembered for ever and no words are good enough to show our gratitude to you if you will mercifully agree to our application for relief'. This letter contains very positive comments on the work of Yang Huizhen and repeated promises were made to give it the full support such work deserves.

Once the ACHA acknowledged and received the Refuge as one of its own institutions, Bai Chongxi, Chairman of the ACHA, wrote to Jiaxing and Zhejiang authorities many times, demanding assistance for Yang's projects. According to Mai Guilian, an orphaned girl taken in by the Refuge, Yang Huizhen often went to other places to raise funds. On several occasions, Mai Guilian went to mosques in Nanjing with Yang Huizhen in order to attend to her, and she met religious teachers and *ahong* wherever they went. She did not know the exact amount of money raised, but she could tell from Yang Huizhen's expression that the result was satisfying.

Yang Huizhen and her work were well-known in Jiaxing. Always wearing a head-dress and with a letter of introduction in her pocket, Yang went everywhere, recounting the pitiable situation of the poor refugees, and asking for relief and help. Through her efforts, Muslims in Jiaxing acquired a reputation for

charity which had been associated only with Christianity and Buddhism. The place she founded had taken in so many refugees and orphans, it had done so much for the education of the orphans and for self-reliance, that its achievements had, to some extent, exceeded that of local Buddhist temples. Thus she attracted the notice of the authorities. On 26 December 1947, when the Muslim Emergency Refuge was 'giving surplus relief materials to the ninety-one aged and young, orphaned and disabled people – to all these extremely poor school children or people in need of help introduced or sent to the Refuge by the village heads', the local authorities 'sent their representatives to attend the event together with representatives from the Party, the Assembly and the Legislative Body. They supervised the organisation of the event, and then had pictures taken to mark the memorable occasion [see Plate 9]'. This event caused a sensation.

PLATE 9: Yang Huizhen: 'A Day to Remember'. 26 December 1947 Leftover relief supplies are handed out at the Muslim Emergency Refuge in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province, founded by Yang Huizhen *Ahong*. People in the photograph: Bai Yun, Da Qianmu, Yang Wangshi, Cu Niu (Yang Laixin's aunt), Han Shashi, Da Qian, Li Fanshi, and Ma Quan; Yao Lishi, Li Xiuying, Mai Guilian, Li Xiuying's mother, Liu Xiaomao's grandmother, Xu Fangshi, Ma Jingfeng's mother, Xu Fengzhen's mother, Yang Huizhen, Qian Jinbiao's wife, Qian Guizhen, Ma Mashi, Yang Decai, Yang Laixin, Han Zhiquan, Li Chuanwen, Ma Genshen, Yang Qinglian, Yang Xiuying, Ma Renshan. Several people in the photograph had come from Shanghai to trade in mutton.
(Plate reproduced by permission of Guo Chengmei, Jiaxing Islamic Association, Zhejiang Province)

The Muslim Emergency Refuge was closed in the first half of 1950.

Yang Huizhen went back to Shanghai, but she never forgot Jiaxing, and she

missed all those she once sheltered. She visited Jiaxing several times, staying in the house of Mai Yaoshi, whom she had given shelter when Mai was widowed and in dire need of help. In 1988, in spite of her old age and frail health, Yang Huizhen again visited Jiaxing and stayed there for over a year. The Hui people, especially those who once resided in the Refuge, welcomed her with warm affection, some offered money to cover all her daily expenses. Yang Xiuying sent her three meals every day in Ramadan, the month of fasting.

Yang Huizhen left Jiaxing and returned to Shanghai in 1989 where she died soon after.

Ba *Ahong*, Henan, Preserving Female Religious Tradition

(narrated by Shui Jingjun)

I had wanted to record Ba *Nu Ahong*'s experiences by listening to her personal account. As a pious woman who believes in the Muslim virtue that one should be careful about one's words, however, Ba *Ahong* is reluctant to talk about herself. She says it is better to speak less: whatever one has to communicate, one should keep 90 per cent to oneself, and the remaining 10 per cent should be spoken only in praise for others. She is willing to discuss anything concerning religion, but refuses to talk about herself. Thus the task to write about her falls on the interviewer.

As I am writing this biography (March 1997), Ba *Ahong* is on her second pilgrimage. In her own words, during my visit she was *mangchao* (exceedingly busy) with her preparations for the pilgrimage. As she talked about the pilgrimage, I could feel the exhilaration in her heart. When Ba *Ahong* completes this pilgrimage, she will become the second *nu ahong* in Henan to have made two journeys to Mecca in recent years.

In early 1995, when I was seeking an *ahong* who knows traditional Persian to help me understand the contents of the *nurenjing* (so-called abridged women's Koran), I consulted a prominent male *ahong* in his eighties, who advised me to visit Ba *Ahong*. After I learned that more than a dozen generations of Ba *Ahong*'s family on her mother's side were noted *ahong* in Henan, that she lived a totally secluded life, rarely ever leaving the mosque, that she refused to receive men unless they were members of her own family, including cadres from the Religious Affairs Department, I was eager to meet her.

In November of 1995, we visited Ba *Ahong*, who was then resident *ahong* in the county town of Wuzhi, Henan. At the age of seventy-five, Ba *Ahong* looked small and frail, but could hear and see well, and was clearheaded and quick in

thought. She treated us with great warmth. We were interested in her family, and she told us that thirteen generations had taken the office of *ahong* in her mother's family, and three generations of *ahong* were known to have been active in her husband's family. She show'ed us hand-copied scripture books which had been passed on for over ten generations. Though most of the scriptures were intended to be studied by male *ahong*, Ba *Ahong* seemed to know them well. When we asked her to chant the Koran, she told us that she had just led the prayers, and that the water was not dry on her (meaning she was still in a pure state). Then she opened the Koran and started chanting. Hearing her beautiful voice, I felt that she had left this noisy world to join her beloved Allah. She said she felt very spiritual as she chanted the Koran. However, Ba *Ahong* is seen as traditional and conservative by members of her congregation. The mosque administrators (*xianglao)* there told us that Ba *Ahong* never posed for pictures and thus had no identity card (it turned out later that she had a picture taken after being persuaded to compromise for the sake of pilgrimage).

On 11 December 1996, I again visited Ba *Ahong*, and I stayed in the women's mosque over night. During our many discussions, I gained a better understanding of the old *nu ahong*. When I arrived at the women's mosque, Ba *Ahong* was not present. She had been invited to chant prayers *(kaijing)* in a Muslim household where a death had occurred (the local tradition demands that if a family member dies, both the male and female a*hong* will be invited to chant the scriptures). This gave me a chance to talk with one of her students who turned out to be Ba *Ahong*'s 15 year old granddaughter. Although not yet graduated from Middle School, she had to study the scriptures, commanded to do so along with her two female cousins. This was not her choice, she said crossly, everyone in the family had to follow her grandmother's 'old feudalist' ideas.

Ba *Ahong* was happy to see me. She was in a good mood, and looking better this time, both spiritually and physically. She had completed the entire application process and had her visa for the pilgrimage. The journey would take about 100 days. Obviously, the coming pilgrimage had inspired Ba *Ahong*. I congratulated her for being the second n*u ahong* in Henan to make two pilgrimages in so short a time. Ba *Ahong* was very excited and affable, ready to supply answers to my various questions. In the two days I spent with her, she struck me as unusually intelligent and wise, with an extraordinary power concealed under a seemingly frail exterior.

As an *ahong*, Ba is the teacher and spiritual leader of the Muslim women who come to worship at the Wuzhi Women's mosque. Her religious knowledge and her firm faith engender mighty spiritual power rarely found in other old ladies.

Constant worship has done wonders for her health. The first afternoon we met, I told her that I'd like to learn to do the *lihufutanbai* (evening prayer), and she was happy to oblige. She watched the clock attentively, and when it was time, she immediately led us to the prayer hall. On our way towards the hall, she stopped at the students' dorm, simply clicked the watch, and all the *hailifan* (students of the Koran) filed out. Though Ba *Ahong* is a short woman, she gives the impression of a general filled with the confidence of victory. She is indeed the heart of the women's mosque, and every one respects and obeys her.

Ba *Ahong*'s father and grandfather were prominent *ahong* who knew both Arabic and Persian, and she acquired Islamic knowledge from them while still a child. Later, a *nu ahong* was invited to their village, and she began to learn from her. She said she did not think of becoming an *ahong* herself at that time, she simply liked to study. When the *nu ahong* from her town took office at the Beixiajie Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou, she followed her. She had studied under two *nu ahong* respectively, but had never participated in the *chuanyi guazhang* (graduation) ceremony. Like all other Muslim women of her age, her marriage was arranged by her parents. Her mother's criteria for the choice of a son-in-law were clearly defined: he must be a believer and able to chant scriptures. Asked about her own attitude towards marriage at that time, Ba *Ahong* said she was too shy to learn about anything relating to marriage. So everything was arranged by her parents. She had eight children, and they are still in awe of her. Her youngest son is the *ahong* in the same community, and three of her granddaughters are studying the scriptures with her. Later, I learned from others that Ba *Ahong*'s husband was also a well-known *ahong* in Henan, and that three of her children (one daughter and two sons) are *ahong*. As Ba *Ahong* talked about her husband who died ten years ago, I felt that she had enjoyed a satisfactory marriage. She commented that her husband cared for nothing but the chanting of scriptures and his duties as an *ahong*, so he looked younger than his real age. Because she had to take care of everything, although not particular about food and dress, her hair turned white completely, but her husband's hair was still all black.

Ba *Ahong* cannot remember clearly when she started her career as an *ahong*. When she took office at a women's mosque some distance from where her husband was located, she was already married with children, who stayed with her in the mosque. She had been an *ahong* for 8 years when the Cultural Revolution broke out, and she returned to her hometown, concentrating on domestic responsibilities. Ba *Ahong* thus took first office in the mid-'50s. She was again invited to take office as an *ahong* in the early 1980s, and to the present she has been *ahong* at five women's mosques in different cities and counties.

When talking about Muslim women, Ba *Ahong* liked best to give this version of a famous quotation: ‘one pure woman is better than a thousand men’. She cited the Hadith more than once in our discussion. Though citing from time to time from Hadiths which maintain that more men than women enter Paradise, and that more women are destined for hell; or that women are inferior to the wisdom of men, Ba *Ahong* believed that as long as a woman proved herself to be a good mother and wife while not neglecting her religious duties, she was better than a thousand good men. When talking about conjugal relationships, she thought a wife should respect her husband, but she was not guilty if she resisted her husband when he violated God’s law. Ba *Ahong* takes great pride in the fact that she has never missed any religious service. Whatever changes happen in society, she will try her best to regulate her own behaviour in line with the Islamic doctrine. Even when not in office, she lives an almost secluded life. She refuses to have pictures taken, and buries her hair when it falls out so that the *wainanren* (men not her own kin) won’t see it.

Even though she is old, she gets up at three every morning, chants the scriptures, and takes breakfast only after the morning service is over. Unlike some Muslim women who are filled with fear of afterlife, Ba *Ahong* is full of confidence about her spiritual fate.

In other people’s eyes, Ba *Ahong* is a conservative woman who sticks to her own principles and ignores social changes. However, she is neither rigid nor unsophisticated. Though leading a relatively secluded life, she cares about what is happening in Muslim society (for instance, she approves of the increase in the number of women’s mosques; and she understands that young Muslim women are choosing sterilisation to keep down the number of children). She never criticises other people, and always cleverly manages to put forward her ideas in an indirect way. For example, her teaching is traditional, but she is familiar with the teaching in the new-type Arabic Schools, and will make sly comparisons with her own way of instruction, always somehow succeeding in proving the value of her accustomed teaching methods.

She has her own ideas about the future of Islam and is not as pessimistic as other Muslims. When we talked about the fact that many people valued making money more than joining in religious services, and that too few local Muslim women come to the women’s mosque for worship, Ba *Ahong* talked about the Prophet. In the first three years, the Prophet too had waited patiently for the right time to disseminate God’s revelations to the people. The future of Islam is secure.

A Muslim woman must abide only by this code of good conduct: ‘to respect the husband, obey the parents-in-law, accept God’s will, follow the Prophet’s

example and observe the law'. She must study the scriptures 'from the cradle to the tomb'. It is not that Ba *Ahong* does not know the world outside is changing, it is that she believes Muslims should live according to their own principles. Adjustment is necessary, but never at the expense of Islamic doctrine.

In many people's eyes, Ba *Ahong* is perhaps an ordinary Muslim woman, a person who sticks to traditions, and an 'old feudalist' to boot. However, I see her as a unique person, gifted with peerless strength of character.

Yang Yinlian *Ahong*, Harbin, Heilongjiang: My Work Report

(In the course of a long conversation in May 1997, Yang *Ahong* handed over this account as a testimony of her work to Maria Jaschok)

Since I was appointed *nu ahong* [in charge of women's religious affairs at a men's mosque], I have never wavered from the principle of loving the motherland and our religion. Carefully observing my responsibilities, I have dedicated all my efforts, however insignificant, to the service of the Party, the country and to religion with the help of the limited knowledge I have acquired, thus gaining trust, respect, and admiration from our Muslim brothers and sisters.

A mosque is a place where *ahong* preach their sermon and Muslim believers participate in religious worship. Besides providing faithful services for Muslims, it is also a place to spread the Communist Party's general and specific policies. To be a qualified *nu ahong*, one has to guide her own behaviour with the principle of loving the country and religion, and set an example for others in the practice of virtues – that is, to make the greatest effort to help Muslims solve their personal problems and overcome difficulties. Only in this way can one hope to gain confidence and support from the Muslim masses and do a good job.

PLATE 10: Progress of a *Nu Ahong*-. Yang Yinlian *Ahong*.
At Eastern Women's Mosque, Harbin, teachers and students congregate for a farewell photo on the occasion of Yang Jin *Nu Ahong*'s departure in order to take part in manual labour in the countryside (Yang Yinlian: top row, middle; Yang Jin: bottom row, on right). 3 September 1955
(Plate reproduced by permission of Yang Yinlian *Ahong*)

When our old house was pulled down due to urban redevelopment, I was offered a new home just next to that of my son's, in Daoli District. However, I exchanged it with someone whose house is nearer to our Mosque in Daowai District, feeling that the convenience and time saved would enable me to offer

still better service to others. I consider this Mosque to be my second home, and every day spend about ten hours working there. I always get there early and leave late to make sure that anyone who comes to the Mosque will be served speedily.

PLATE 11: Yang Yinlian, on her day of ordination, with her teacher Yang Jin *Ahong*. 6 August 1958
(Plate reproduced by permission of Yang Yinlian *Ahong*)

According to the Koran, to bathe the body before burial is one of the required Islamic religious rites. It is the dirtiest and most exhausting work but always requires the greatest care and sense of responsibility. You have to do the work regardless of the weather. In summer, this can be especially difficult. Some decayed bodies have maggots crawling all over them, and they smell bad. The corpses of those who commit suicide, or those who fall victim to violence or murder, are horrific to look at. Whatever the case may be, I have to bathe each corpse with the same care, and I never allow myself any trace of negligence. Once, a cement bridge collapsed in Taiping District and a Muslim woman was among the victims. As it was hot and the body had been left in the water for a long time before it was eventually recovered, the corpse was badly decomposed and invaded by maggots when it was brought to be bathed. How could I leave it alone. Instead, I performed the rites with great care, moving the body as gently as possible and purifying it. When it was done, my assistant and I fell ill. This kind of situation occurs every year. The only difference lies in the extent of the physical decay.

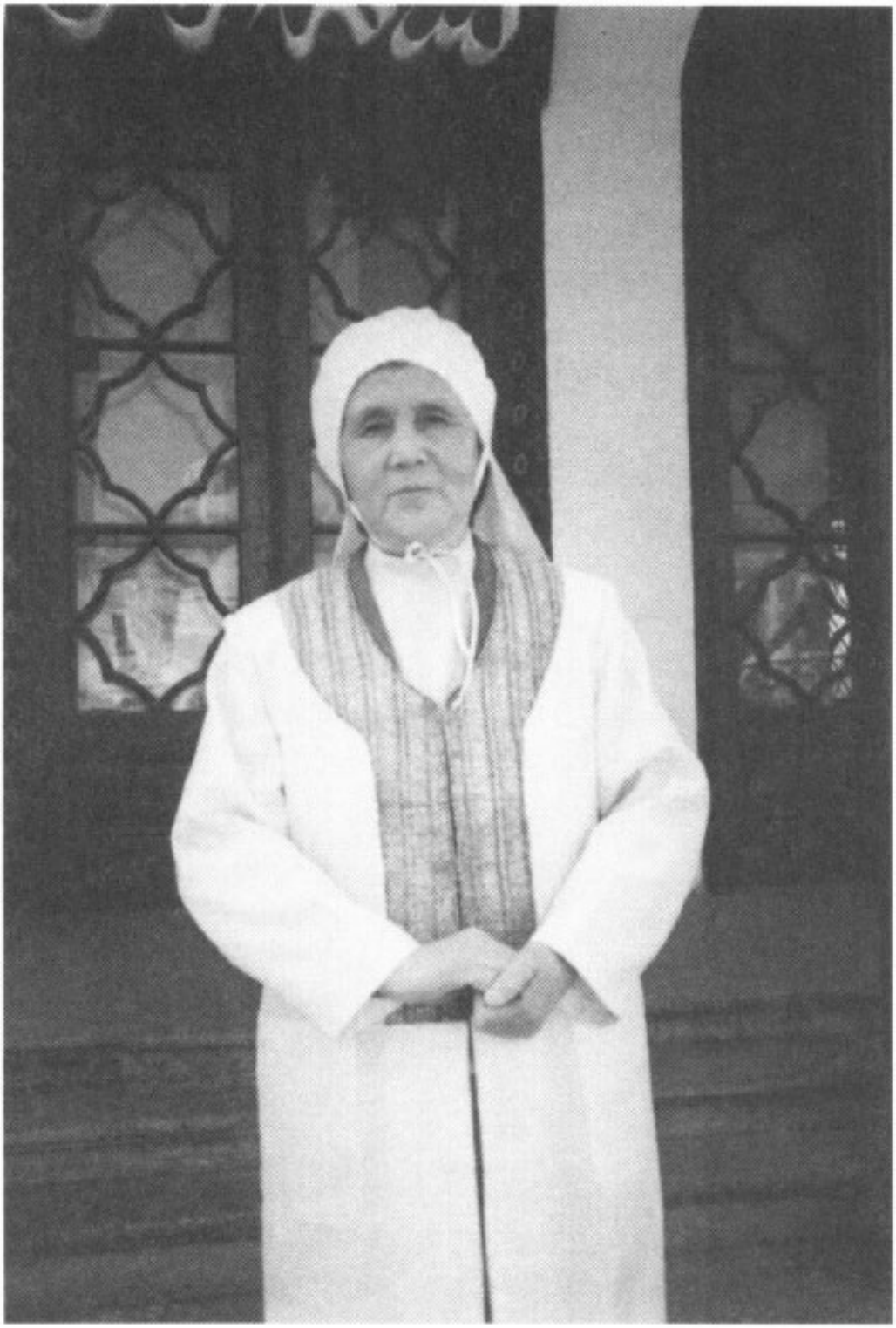


PLATE 12: Yang Yinlian *Ahong* in front of the Eastern Mosque in Harbin. 18 April 1997 (Jaschok)

Then I was put in charge of the women's bathing room, where I have learned a lot during these years. At first, few women came to do the required ablution

rites. Some women began to complain, but I did not lose my confidence when hearing this. I simply took [even greater] efforts to clean the bath tub, to help old ladies get water and take a bath, to give instructions in hygiene to the young and to ensure the proper observation of the purification process. Gradually, more and more women came to take the bath. They praised me for my hard work and warm-hearted services. These [expressions of praise] have made me happy.

The bathers include some forgetful old ladies and some careless young girls. Due to the smooth soap used, some of the bathers would inadvertently lose their jewels in the process of bathing. When I cleaned the bathroom, I would often find golden earrings or rings which I returned to their owners. Now everyone knows and appreciates what I have done.

Patriotism and the Koran both require people to do good things and be kind to others in their lifetime, and never do anything mean or evil. I always take this principle as the moral standard by which to judge my own behaviour.

In recent years, I have made every possible effort to answer the call of the Party and the government. I have donated money to the National Disaster Relief, to the charitable fund-raising drives organised by the Provincial TV Station in Harbin, to the 'Hope Project', and to the construction of a mosque in Taiping and in Shoufang respectively. When people in other parts of the country wrote to me, saying that they were in need of money to build or repair their mosques, I would not hesitate to donate money. Up till now, I have made donations of over ten-thousand *yuan* RMB, apart from clothes [which I also donated].

Every year when International Women's Day (8 March) is approaching, I will ask other people's opinions and try to reach an agreement on how to prepare for the holiday. Every time, I spend my own money to buy sweets, tea and some souvenirs for a gathering. At the meeting, women express their own ideas freely. This is of benefit to every one present, and all the participants feel very happy.

I have discussed with Muslim believers as to how to cut down on our Mosque's expenses. Everyone agreed to donate some money to buy a washing machine for the ablution room. With this machine, we can often wash curtains, common towels and the floor-covers in the prayer hall, thus improving sanitation, personal hygiene and health.

When I learned that Han Zaiwen *Ahong* was going abroad for study, I offered some financial assistance. I also explained this [situation) to the others. All together, over one-thousand *yuan* of alms were collected voluntarily among the sisters for Han *Ahong*, who was moved and expressed his thanks again and again. He promised to work hard and repay the nurturing and expectation of the Party and State, and the Muslims' concerns and hopes, with excellent academic achievements.

As most of the Hui people (Muslims of the Hui Nationality in China) live scattered and generally stick to their own way of living, it is difficult for the young to find a spouse and this has become one of the focal social issues at present. I have much personal experience of this. Although the government has tried several times to set up a matchmaking agency in the Mosque to solve the problem, this has not worked well. In view of this, I have tried to utilise my friends and relatives and my extensive connections with the Hui masses. As a result, I have helped six or seven young couples to get married. I plan to collaborate with those who work in marriage introduction agencies in order to do our best to help the young to find a satisfactory spouse. I am sure this co-operation will produce even more results in the future.

It is doubtless a fact that working among the masses is hard, and even harder if you mean to do it well. However, if you are sincere, and if you are doing something real, good and kind for others, it is not difficult to do mass work. I firmly believe that I can do the [mass] work well. I take this to be my basic lifetime belief and nothing can make me falter.

Little schooling and comparatively poor working abilities account for the fact that I cannot avoid making mistakes and faulty judgements. Just as the old saying goes: there is no perfect person in the world. Once I realise that I have made a mistake, or when it is pointed out by the leaders, or by others, I do not hesitate to correct it. I shall overcome my weaknesses and be always ready to take others' good advice. I can only assure you that I will always [be ready to] correct my mistakes.

Daughters-in-Law in an *Ahong*'s Family, Recalled by Shui Zhiying

When I graduated from College in the early 1960s, I said good-bye to my boyfriend, who was of Han nationality, with ambivalent feelings. I loved him, and he loved me. However, I had to obey my parents and believe in the go-between's words, so I married a young Muslim before I knew what I was doing. There had been four generations of *ahong* in my husband's family. I cannot say why I agreed to marry into such a family. Maybe it w'as out of love for my own [Hui] people, or for the sake of my faith? Who knows? However, I was able to declare to my boyfriend: 'I'm sorry. Let's say goodbye! I ought to, I must, marry a man of Hui origin. I cannot break my parents' hearts by exposing them to the ridicule of my relatives'.

My husband worked in another location, while I taught in the county-seat town near his native place, and several times every year, I would visit his family.

The time [just prior to and during the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976] was unusual, and one could experience little religious atmosphere in this family which had produced four generations of *ahong*. Mostly, I would stay with my husband's grandmother and my mother-in-law. My father-in-law, who had been a teacher and an *ahong* in different periods of his life, was never involved in the conversations held among us three generations of daughters-in-law.

My Husband's Grandmother

I know very little about my husband's grandmother (I used to call her Grandma the way my husband did).

When I got married, Grandma was in her seventies and my first impressions were that she was an ordinary old woman who was kind but quiet, who seldom showed her true feelings. I learned from others that Grandma was quite learned in the doctrines and canons of Islam. She was once made the *shiniang* [acting in the official capacity of an *Ahong*'s wife] in the *fang* [mosque parish] where her husband was appointed *ahong* when she was young. Her husband died when she was only in her thirties and left her with three sons and one daughter. She had to live in the mosque with her children when her father-in-law took the office of an *ahong*. At that time, an *ahong* was paid little and led a poor and simple life. Grandma experienced plenty of hardships in that period. However, life in the mosque also helped to cultivate her character, and after some time, I began to see many unique characteristics in this old lady.

Grandma was truly a remarkable woman. We could never tell her feelings by looking at her expressions, for she was smiling all the time. She kept smiling when her sons stared at her with contempt, and she would not change her expression when hearing her daughters-in-law quarrel with one another. Whatever food she was offered, she would accept with a smile, neither raising complaints nor offering praise. She kept her smile whatever happened. Out of curiosity, I was eager to hear of her experiences, feelings and judgements concerning family members (for I had been subjected to too much of my mother-in-law's chit-chat), but she simply kept silent. One day, I felt I could no longer keep silent, and I said to her: 'Grandma, you certainly suffered a lot when you were left a young widow with several small children'. On hearing my words, she replied with a faint smile: 'Allah decides everything'. I looked at her, waiting for her to go on, but she closed her eyes to rest, and I knew that meant I should stop asking questions. Another time, I was angry to see my father-in-law behave rudely to Grandma, and tried to comfort her by saying: 'Grandma, don't be angry'. She looked at me surprised: 'Am I angry?' Thus, I dared not say

anything at all. During the three years of famine and disasters, in the early 1960s, everyone was going hungry, but Grandma never complained. One night, she casually said something to herself with a smile while making the bed: ‘The knots on my neck are getting smaller and smaller, and the throat is getting tighter and tighter!’ I was puzzled by her words while her grandson (my husband) burst out laughing: ‘Grandma’s description is so vivid, this is great!’ I wanted to take advantage of this chance and get her to talk more. I asked: ‘Grandma, are you happy?’ She replied with a calm smile: ‘Thanks to God’s blessings. Yes, I am’. I thought she must have felt very hungry then. During those years [1958 until after 1978], there were no mosques nor *ahong*, and she could not worship. However, I often observed her talking under her breath when by herself. Perhaps she was reciting the scriptures. Grandma adopted a neutral attitude towards everyone, yet one could feel her kindness, and would respect her.

Grandma was very fastidious. Her dress and bed were usually kept clean and tidy, and she would always wash her hands before a meal or after she had gone to the latrine. When going to bed, she would sweep the floor first. To do this in a backward area of the countryside at that time was not easy. Grandma said: ‘God may call a person at any time, how can I go to God all dirty and untidy?’ My mother-in-law once told me that Grandma never helped her take care of her children, and her excuse was that the children were too dirty. However, she often held my children in her arms with great affection. Because I was suspicious of my mother-in-law, I asked Grandma: ‘Did you hold your grandsons when they were young kids?’ She shook her head and said: ‘No, but I have my own reasons’. She never told me why. But it proved that she was honest, and also that my Mother-in-law was telling the truth. Grandma’s answer revealed that she was not only physically clean, but also spiritually pure. With that I respected Grandma even more.

Grandma was quiet. She never spoke loudly, and she liked to stay alone. She never went to other people’s homes, or talked with neighbours about anyone behind his or her back. If a visitor came, she would withdraw to her bed and sit there for meditations. Grandma was a firm Muslim believer, but she would never ask the young generation to follow her example, or try to preach to others. She kept her belief to herself. And then, one day she passed away as quietly as she had lived, there had been no illness. She seems to have come into the world believing and left it in the same spiritual state. Her experiences and her views on the family members were buried with her, and they remain a closed book.

Rest in peace, Grandma, never to be known!

My Mother-in-Law

Mother-in-law was a kind woman, who was frank and quite talkative. Having no daughter herself, I became the apple of her eye when I entered the family. She always spoke her mind frankly and never ceased to care about me. Our relationship was indeed a harmonious one.

Mother-in-law was nick-named ‘Madwoman’ by her mother because she would never adopt a guise, or hesitate to express her feelings, be it indignation, joy, sorrow or happiness. When she was happy, she would smile and talk to everyone she met; when she got angry, she would slap her knees and jump up in the air, shouting and yelling at anyone who annoyed her; when feeling sad, she would cry loudly and sing of her sorrow in exquisitely rhymed chants. I called her ‘Li Shuang Shuang’ (the leading lady in a film made in the early 1960s – characterised by her strong love of the collective cause and her eagerness to mind other people’s business), for Mother-in-law liked to worry herself about quarrels among family members, conflicts between neighbours, or anything at all that concerned the Production Team. The threshing ground was right in front of her house. For fear someone might steal the wheat, my mother-in-law volunteered to keep watch over it, sometimes staying up the whole night. My father-in-law, whose principle was to play it cautiously, was angry with her behaviour, but could not stop her.

Grandma and Father-in-law never commented on past events, so I could learn about the family only from Mother-in-law. When she married at the age of sixteen, (a year younger than her husband), she said, she was quite satisfied with the marriage because her husband was from a prominent family which had produced generations of *ahong*. At first, the family accepted her with much warmth, but later every member in the family (including her husband) rejected her. I imagine she was rejected because she was careless of small details and had a rebellious nature. For instance, once after a dispute with her husband (maybe he had beaten her), she left a pair of her shoes beside the well [of the mosque]; then, without consulting anyone, rushed to the County Court to sue him. While the family was frantically searching for her in the well, she made the Court officials come to their home, thus making the family lose face in public. She had a variety of such tricks up her sleeves, actually so many that I cannot remember the details. She finally broke away from the family and returned to her parents’ family with her only son, just one month old then. However, she could not live harmoniously with her own mother, quarrels often broke out between mother and daughter. Later, she rented a house and lived there with her son, making a living weaving and spinning. Her husband did not return to her until her son was twelve years old (after the founding of the People’s Republic of China).

Mother-in-law liked best to follow new trends. In the early 1950s, China was

involved in primary stages of the agricultural co-operatives movement, and the Wiping Out Illiteracy Campaign was in its high tide. Most peasant women would bring their sewing baskets when taking part in collective field-labour, which meant at rest time, they could do sewing for their family. But Mother-in-law was different; she did not like sewing after she passed her thirties. She would bring with her a small blackboard and a school bag. She would learn to read and write during the breaks. She was so eager to study that she placed an oil lamp by her bedside, but fearing others might protest her staying up late, she had to cover the light with a book. All these difficulties, however, did not prevent her from applying herself diligently. Sometimes, she would study until dawn. As she spent most of her time studying, she could not even find time to make a pair shoes for her son. Greatly enraged, her son once cut the upper part of his half-finished shoes into pieces. During the Great Leap Forward Campaign, in 1958, Mother-in-law became famous over night. She gave impromptu performances at gatherings of ten-thousand or more people, and her verses surprised everyone present. Pictures with a brief account of her accomplishments were put up on the walls of the Cultural Palace of the Production Brigade. One day when she went to see the displays there, she noticed several girls who seemed to have difficulty understanding what was in the wall posters and she volunteered her explanations. She completed her presentation with the following words: ‘Girls, do you know who is the person described here? It is me!’ All the girls applauded loudly and showered her with praise. She advised them with great pride: ‘Hurry up and learn to read and write. Otherwise, you will find yourselves trapped and you cannot move even an inch’.

My first child was born in 1962, and Mother-in-law came to help care for the baby. One time I left my classroom during break to feed the baby. When the bell rang, I could not find Mother-in-law anywhere. Looking for her on the school grounds, and still holding the baby, I suddenly heard her loud voice coming from the classroom. Oh, my goodness, she was giving my students a lesson in my place! I rushed to hand her the baby and pushed her out of the classroom. I was annoyed, but she was proud of herself. ‘Of course somebody has to give the students a lesson when you are feeding the baby,’ she explained, as if she had just accomplished something great.

Mother-in-law described herself as an honest Muslim, and she loved to use phrases like ‘May Allah Have Mercy On Us’ or ‘By the Grace of God’ … right throughout her chattering. But she neither observed Ramadan [period of religious fasting] nor participated in prayer. Sometimes she would spread rumours or tell strange tales. According to her, for instance, someone had turned into a pig for failing to show their parents the proper filial respect; some woman

bore a deformed baby for having been mean; and other such stories. When her husband protested at her irrationality, she ignored him. Her superstition was really shocking. When I gave birth to my first daughter, my poor health caused me to become nervous easily, and she waved sticks and knives to drive out the devils. On the fourth day after the birth of my youngest son, who kept crying the whole day, Mother-in-law broke a bowl of china, and cut the baby's face with a sharp porcelain fragment, declaring that it would scare away the devils. The baby was bleeding, my father-in-law stamped his feet with anger, while I cried for my poor baby. But she never cared about our reactions, she carried on in her own fashion and believed that she knew best.

Mother-in-law was very kind. What I admired most in her was her readiness to sacrifice herself to help others. During harsh times of the early 1960s, even though our family suffered many deprivations, Mother-in-law kept giving money and things to people who were trapped in yet greater hardship. As her husband was not so generous, she made me support her little schemes. We both managed to 'spirit away' food from the kitchen for our hungry neighbours and friends, keeping my father-in-law in the dark. Sometimes, Mother-in-law would go out with a bowl of food, pretending that she was visiting a neighbour while eating. Once she took out three bowls of noodles, which aroused her husband's suspicions. He questioned her: 'How is it be possible for you to eat so much?' Mother-in-law was not scared at all when her tricks were exposed, she responded with the truth: 'I gave it to the neighbour's kids. To tell you the truth, *Laokou* [a nickname for a greedy person, something like Big Mouth), this is not the first time I did this. Whatever way you want to punish me, do as you like'. I broke into a cold sweat when I listened to her. However, her husband dared not to attack her righteous conduct and withdrew. When my husband returned home in 1961, he gave his mother 300 *yuan* (at that time, a big sum and much could have been done with it). Before a week passed, she had *chusan* (distributed) the whole sum among our hungry neighbours, relatives and friends. Our family had only sweet potatoes to live on. Her reasoning went like this: 'With the potatoes, we can survive. When I gave away the 300 *yuan*, I saved several lives. It was worth doing! I gave it as alms. It is done now'. None of the family members reprimanded her, all thought she was reasonable to do as she had done. I respected and admired her even more after that. Mother-in-law was also generous when contributing to the collective good. One year, several families were raising money to build a road, and her husband gave the stipulated amount. But Mother-in-law donated an additional share from her own savings. She said to her husband in a passionate voice: 'To build bridges and roads is good for everyone. Everyone must support such a cause, and so should I'.

Mother-in-law passed away in 1993, at the age of seventy-eight. By then her son and I had been separated for twenty years, but I went to her funeral and expressed my deep sorrow. My son told me that when his grandma was dying, she kept murmuring: ‘Allah, I can’t go on. I am going home, home to Arabia …’.

Mother-in-law firmly believed that she was a true Muslim. Though she was not accepted by her husband’s *ahong* family when she was young, she kept recalling their past glory and fame. Her kind of faith differed greatly from that of her husband’s and Grandma’s. She was strongly influenced by Buddhism: to bring benefits to the future generations by always treating others kindly, generously and with great compassion. Where has her soul found its final resting place? I wonder.

Now to Me

I am the first daughter-in-law in this family to have received a formal education. I respect Grandma’s way of living her belief, and I love Mother-in-law for her righteous and forthright character. But it is impossible for me to be like them in every respect because I have my own outlook on life, my own principles.

It is the family into which I was born that has greatly influenced my personality and my ideas. I was born into a well-to-do household which local people called the *shuxiang zbijia* (a family of several generations of scholars). We were a large family, and nearly twenty members of three generations lived under one roof. Of all the family members, I respected my Grandfather the most, but I loved my mother most deeply.

Grandfather was a well-known doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, who respected and admired Confucianism, and always followed Confucian moral doctrines when dealing with others. He also required his children and grandchildren to guide their conduct by Confucian precepts. But he was also a true Muslim, who took part in *zhuma* (prayer day) worship at the mosque, adhered to Ramadan, and strictly observed the Muslim way of life. Strangely, he never instructed his children or grandchildren in the Islamic doctrine, nor did he insist on their observance. My father and his brothers did not agree with Grandfather’s religious activities, sometimes they even ridiculed him. Although I was very young at that time, I respected Grandpa’s belief. If he did not come back on time from his prayers, I worried and would sneak out to meet him. I was angry with my father and uncles, and I wished that Grandpa would show his wrath and stand up to his sons’ provocations. However, he simply smiled and accepted the situation. He stuck to his belief, making neither explanations nor

conversions.

Grandpa was in his seventies when I was born, and he loved me dearly. As far as I can remember, the first thing he did when entering the house was to inquire about me. ‘Where is *Xiaoyingzi* (I was Grandpa’s ‘Little Treasure’)?’ On hearing that, I would rush into his arms and search in his wide sleeves for cookies which he often concealed there. After supper, he usually took a rest in the backyard where he would hold me in his arms, teaching me to distinguish the stars and the moon, and how to tell the seasons by observing the Milky Way. I was fascinated by all of this. Besides, I also learned about proper nutritious food and how to look after oneself. On winter nights, I would stay beside Grandpa, listening to stories of his or his father’s childhood. Grandpa sent me to study in the local primary school when I was six, and he began to be strict with me. He demanded that I follow Confucian principles in whatever I did, and keep a close watch on my behaviour. His wish was to see me grow up as a well-mannered lady, and kept telling me to work hard in school. He said, a girl could only be sensible and virtuous if she was able to read, material benefits were less important. Gradually, I started to observe Grandpa’s behaviour and wondered why he was so admired and respected by all our neighbours and by the local people. I came to understand when I grew up: Grandpa was not only a competent doctor, but also a man with great ethical virtues. He healed the wounded and rescued the dying, regardless of their family origins; he treated others with tolerance and never quarrelled with neighbours or family members. He was happy to live an ordinary life, kept away from high officials, and would not play up to people in power even if they were family members. Supported by his spiritual beliefs, he lived by his medical talents. He died at the age of eighty-two. By then the People’s Republic was established, and our family was classified as ‘landlord class’. However, Grandpa was treated as ‘enlightened gentry’ by the township authorities, and countless people from all walks of life attended his funeral to pay their respect.

Half a century has passed since Grandpa left me. Now, I still try to put myself in the shoes of Grandpa when I am dealing with some difficult problems. My respected Grandpa will live in my heart forever; he is my model on this earth.

My mother was an ordinary housewife. In my mind she was a great mother, who did everything a mother could possibly do for her daughter. Although perhaps I paid too high a price for this wonderful motherly love, particularly when I think of my marriage, I never regret that decision because it made my mother happy. Of course, this is what I am thinking now.

Mother was born into a scholarly family in 1911 when the Republican period started. Her grandfather and father were both teachers in traditional Chinese

schools and well-qualified veterinarians. Mother learnt from a young age to chant the scriptures, do sewing (her sister-in-law, an *Ahong*'s daughter, taught her), make beautiful clothes, cook tasty meals, and she knew how to read and write. Growing up in an atmosphere permeated by Islamic faith, she was open-minded, generous, and tolerant with others. She won everyone's love after she moved into her husband's family. Her nephews all liked their youngest aunt very much.

Mother was actually my first teacher in life. When I began to talk, the lesson I had to review each night while lying in Mother's arms included the following: Who is your God? It is Allah. Who is your Prophet? It is Mohammed. I learnt how to read *qingzhenyan* [Islamic core beliefs]. She would also tell me of what was pre-ordained by God, of afterlife, and of angels, until I would fall asleep. The first religious feeling I experienced was the fear of Allah, for Mother told me there were two angels standing by every person's shoulders, watching his or her words and deeds. If you did something mean, the invisible God would punish you. I remember that once I lied to Mother, and I was troubled all day and all night. By day, I was thinking how God would punish me; by night I had difficulty going to sleep and starting hallucinating about dragons, horrible giants and all kinds of weird creatures. I was so scared that I began screaming. Mother did not know what to do with me, and stayed up all night. I thought that I was being punished by God. Now over 50 years have passed, I don't remember why I lied then, but the horrible nightmares are still clearly imprinted in my memory.

When I was about five, a minor incident changed my feeling towards God. That was during Ramadan. Mother had to prepare the Ramadan meal at night. One night I woke up in the middle of the night but could not find Mother. I was so scared that I started crying loudly and I fell out of my bed cutting my jaw on the sharp edge of a stone on the floor and began to bleed. The next day my cousins asked Mother: 'Why did Allah not protect Zhiying from getting hurt while you were observing the fast?' I began to consider this question and thought it was entirely reasonable to ask it. Now I am nearly sixty, and the scar left by the fall still shows on my under-lip. Just like the scar, my puzzlement over Allah is forever with me.

When I went to school. Mother's expectation of me differed from Grandpa's. She wanted me to work hard and be just as independent and capable as a boy (Mother had not given birth to a son then). She was strict with my studies just like any serious father. At that time, a first-year pupil had to go to school for self-study before the morning classes began. As there was no clock in our house, Mother would wake me up after the third crowing of the roosters for fear that I might be late. In winter, the night was long. It was still dark and quiet when I set

out for school. Mother would take my hand and accompany me to school with a little lantern. She would not leave until I was safe in school. In the evening, she would sew while I did my homework, and she would not allow me to go to bed until she was satisfied with my work. Once Mother demanded me to memorise by heart how to tell the time. It was already late at night when I passed her test. Then, of course, I thought Mother too cruel and inhuman. But when I scored high, I could feel that Mother was even happier than I.

At the age of twelve, I went to Middle School 50 *li* [about 25 km] away from home, in Nanyang. At that time, the land reform was just coming to an end, and our big family was divided into several smaller households. Life in my family was really difficult. Father had to make a living by hiring himself out as a coolie or peddler. It was indeed impossible for him to continue to send me to school. But I was eager to go to school, and I cried to show my displeasure. Mother would not argue with Father, nor comfort me with any words. Instead, she would silently prepare some staple food and then slip me scores of coins, it's time that you went to school. Go, Zhiying!' she would say. Carrying a bag of *wotou* (steamed bread made of sweet potato flour) – my ration for the whole week, I went to school in tears. I had to cover the 50 *li* twice every week at the age of twelve. When it was time for my meal, I dared not to look in the direction of the school canteen, for the food there was such a temptation to me. I would quickly get myself a cup of boiled water from the boiler-room and rush to the library with one *wotou*, which I ate while reading books. In this way, I finished my three years of school life and graduated with excellent grades. In order to spare my parents heavy financial burden, I dared not dream about going to university. Instead, I applied to the Normal School (which was free of charge then). I entered the school without taking part in the entrance examination, due to my high test scores, and due to good behaviour in Middle School. Later, in the same way, I entered a 3-year college. In the early 1960s, I finally graduated and became a teacher in a middle school. Though at first I had only a very small income, I saved most of the salary and sent it to my parents. I am grateful to Mother, and all I could do for her was to work hard to enable her to lead a better life.

My family lived in a mixed community of both Hui and Han people. There were not many Hui people in this community, and even fewer Hui people had received higher education. Mother began to worry about my marriage soon after I became a teacher. One of my cousins had married a completely 'hanified' young Mongolian man (in the eyes of Hui people, a hanified Mongolian has turned into a Han person). Relatives and family members adopted contradictory attitudes towards the marriage. Mother feared that I might go my cousin's way,

and I swore to myself that I would get a Hui husband whatever it took. But when love arrived, who could have resisted! Before I knew what had happened, I had fallen in love with a Han person of all people. Mother was perhaps aware of this, I could tell that she was worried and irked by my situtation. Every time I saw Mother, I felt guilty and uneasy. After considering my situation for over one year, I finally decided to separate from my boyfriend. Backed by Mother and all the other family members, I became the daughter-in-law of an *ahong*'s family. Seeing Mother so happy over my choice of husband, I felt that I would never regret my decision – for to make Mother happy has always been my most ardent desire.

Truthfully, I came to love the *ahong* family more than I ever loved my husband. My husband joined the Army at sixteen upon graduation from secondary school. He worked in government administration in Northwest China after he finished his military service. In time I discovered that he had kept nothing of his Hui heritage except for his origin. He did not live in the way of Hui people, nor did he believe in Islam. Under his influence, I did not only violate some Islamic taboos, but also lost the minimal religious consciousness I had had. For certain complicated reasons, my husband and I began to live separately after a marriage which had lasted 12 years. When we finally were divorced, we had four children – two boys and two girls.

After retirement [from teaching], I have begun to review my life's frustrations, and I find that everything in nature seems to be controlled by some invisible force. Now my former father-in-law keeps recommending to me Islamic texts to read, and I often have discussions on the mystery of life with my niece who is a social scientist. My long-buried religious consciousness is again coming to the fore. Now I think God controls everything in the world. Everything is pre-ordained by God. I have begun to sing His praises, and am willing to do good for other Muslims and contribute in whatever way to mosque congregations. Although I strictly follow Islamic rules, I don't like to take part personally in some of the religious activities which I think are only outer form. What I am thinking of most is the whereabouts of the soul when a person dies: when a person dies, his or her body will stay in the earth, but where will the soul go? Sometimes I think life will go out at death in the way a lamp goes out. I have kept asking myself the question which is asked by Xianglin's widow, a character created by Lu Xun: is there a soul after death?' But I cannot answer the question. Maybe I will die with the mystery still unresolved. I wish there to be a soul: if so, I would be able always to stay together with Grandpa, Grandma, Mother-in-law …, we would live in that pure land forever. Then I also wish that there is nothing: I would disappear into the universe forever, and there would be no

distinction between me, you, and the other. Oh, how wonderful this would be. But I don't believe in paradise, or hell … This is absurdity.

Dear Grandpa, your life's principles have influenced your granddaughter, now you can rest content. Grandma, I can understand your mysterious existence – why should we take the trouble to make others understand us. As human beings, we are free to choose our own way of life. Dear Mother-in-law, you have lived truly as yourself in your 78 years of life. My beloved and dearest Mother, I know that you are better than I and that I can never catch up with you but your daughter will follow the teachings of the Koran in the latter half of her life. You gave your daughter life, and she will take on your faith. You don't need to worry any more! Allah has had the mercy of granting you a long and healthy life.

My Daughter-in-Law

My daughter-in-law is of Han nationality. She respects my way of being, and I love her very much. When we were living under the same roof, she would not buy any *non-qingzhen* (halal] food. She never intervenes when I ask my son and granddaughter to go to the mosque prayers. I, too, respect her way of living. I have never tried to teach her the Islamic doctrine or canons. She is free to deal with everything in the way Han people are accustomed to do things. I never interfere. Instead, I will give her my support.

The daughters-in-law of four generations in this family of *ahong* have different life experiences, inner worlds and beliefs. I can somehow feel that when it comes to this family, Islam is of less and less significance, it may be disappearing altogether. I hope it can prosper again, but then, I don't see much which gives me cause for hope.

Note

1 Yang Huizhen's biography was reconstructed by Guo Chengmei, Hui scholar and Jiaxing Islamic Association official (and edited by Jaschok). He is the son of a prominent *ahong* family and his mother, a *shiniang*, was appointed to succeed Yang Huizhen when the latter was forced to depart for Shanghai.
Guo's reconstruction of Yang Huizhen *Ahong*'s work in Jiaxing is based on interviews of former wards and students of the *Ahong*, and on the following documents, property of Jiaxing Islamic Association, Zhejiang Province:
Official letters signed by Jiaxing City Assembly, No. 1452 (19 December 1948). Report submitted by the Jiaxing Branch of ACHA in Zhejiang, No. 71 (7 June 1948). Report submitted and signed by Yang Huizhen, head of the Charity Primary School which came under the auspices of the Jiaxing Muslim Emergency Refuge.
Document submitted by the Jiaxing HJY, No. 32 (7 February 1949).
Detailed list of refugees submitted by Jiaxing HJY (4 February 1949).
The Refuge budget: 'The monthly budget of the Refuge is equal to 14 *dan* of rice, which covers all the

employees' payment, the rents and other expenses', Report No. 25 submitted by Jiaxing Jiaoyangyuan, All-China *Huijiao* Association. As the prices fluctuated greatly, all expenses were paid on the price of rice. 1 *dan* = 60 kg, 14 *dan* = 840 kg.

Epilogue

Historical imperatives for the Hui Muslim community in China to resort to innovative means in order to preserve and reinvigorate faith in a hostile climate provided women in Central China with an instrumental role, facilitating their emergence from confined spheres of domestic activity into sites of religious, educational and social activity. Some of these sites expanded their functions over time and gained in influence over the community, others contracted, and not a few disappeared never to be revived again, with diverse developments depending on local constellations of culture, social structure, religious tradition and gender relations. These innovative institutions, based on women's religious and social needs, granted unprecedented opportunities to advance and alter existing religious structures to incorporate their aspirations.

Utilising Bauer's (1997:226–233) cross-cultural criteria of women's participation in patriarchal religion, Chinese Muslim women can be seen to seize opportunities from which to develop advantages for themselves; such as expanding sites of education into multi-purpose institutions, extending the social influence of *nusi* through networking, using religious congregation and instruction to build up support structures beyond mosque grounds. Collective ritual worship enabled women to affirm their spirituality under the guidance of their *nu ahong*, the essential brokers of religious knowledge, requited faith and thus spiritual salvation. In this intermediary role, a number of educated women gained positions as professional religious leaders and opened up avenues for participation in religious debates of import to women.

Although the current educational level of *tin ahong* is commonly still inferior, leadership positions enable the more learned and respected among them to start to question patriarchal readings (even if more often done through the use of Maoist critiques of feudal religious culture than through the liberating doctrine of fundamental Islam) in the course of which identification with Islamic role models of strong and assertive women has become particularly effective, making 'local cultural ideals' (as distinct from cultural world-views, see Bauer, 1997:228) attainable to women.

Cross-cultural studies stress the importance of contextual and personal

circumstances in accounting for the varying impact and different degrees of empowerment of women as a result of religious involvement. We have found that the predominance of rural or small-township milieux, the involvement of many illiterate women, the majority of them elderly, from a background in agriculture and manual labour whose retirement and disengagement from productive labour and from many household duties bring release but also fear over their status in the family and over their afterlife, engender needs and anxieties which only the *mi ahong* can relieve. Where women retire early, or in traditional extended families hand over responsibilities to a daughter-in-law, they find in mosques an affirmation of their personal worth and of their continued value which would be difficult to obtain elsewhere. It is possible to maintain that whereas only relatively few women's mosques in urban settings can meet more stringent expectations as to the quality of teaching and learnedness of *ahong*, the presence of *nusi* even in the most humble environments of remote rural settlements gives rise to hope for women: religious aspiration requires the reading of texts, affirmation of education where otherwise women find few opportunities to apply literary skills. Indeed, as we have shown, individual women find an outlet for skill and energy when engaging in religious work which can lead to personal satisfaction, spiritual contentment and recognition from the community; understood by the believers as acts of worship, this active praise of God in turn contributes to a sense of personal optimism over their prospect of eternal life in heaven.

Wherever there are Muslim gatherings to participate in Islamic instruction, collective worship or religious celebrations, they are carried by the presence, however intangible, of a universal *umma* of significant influence, which makes even the smallest Muslim congregation a vital and self-conscious part of the transcending power of Islam. The space inhabited by women's mosques and schools has become by their very existence an extension of the powerful *umma*. The implications of women's spatial occupation can be interpreted in two ways: as strengthening the bond which unites *all* Muslim congregations against external pressures; or as reinforcing women's determination *against* those daring to encroach on their claims to membership in the universal fellowship of believers. Minority ethnic status, Israeli remarks in his history of Muslims in China (1980), reinforces the prominence of religious belief and pride in membership of a superior enlightened faith which produces an ever-present quality of oppositionality, however dormant – and for some women religious leaders this quality of oppositionality might apply to *any* adversary daring to question their right to exist.

Structural and historical factors make for a unique situation for Muslim

women. In Harrell's analysis, used throughout our study, minority women act as one of the central metaphors of scaling the 'progress' of peripheral (minority) people to the standards of civilisation represented by the civilising Centre. In the case of Hui people, the 'stigmatised identity' (Eidheim, quoted in Harrell, 1996:6) resides most prominently in women's place *(funu diwei)*, in the construct of the subordinated Muslim woman, as an index of 'superior' qualities of the Centre. But as we have argued, women are not merely inscribed symbolic markers of social boundaries. The role of the state and the Communist Party in China as guardians of sexual egalitarianism has granted women opportunities to use a non-Islamic institution to start reforming Islam, to use Islamic institutions to gain positions of authority, however limited, in a secular state and in the process help re-define the symbolic map which grounds them in passivity.

In a recent investigation of attitudes towards female education among Muslim women in Ningxia, marked differences emerged between local women and women who had migrated there from Henan. Whereas the former expressed indifference, or even hostility to the education of young girls, Henanese women, old or young, 'all agreed that girls must go to school, and none is opposed to this idea' (Ding Guoyong, 1996:53–54). It is one of many illustrations of the effect *nusi* education has had on women, and in popular perception Henanese have for good reason supplied *ahong* and female religious teachers to other Muslim parts of China. The same qualities of learning, ambition, assertiveness and open-mindedness which gives rise to charges of un-Islamic conduct among some critics buttress the argument of others who advocate their expansion and continued reform. The women who lead the most independent *nusi* see no contradiction when they assert, as Yang Yinlian *Ahong* does in her report, that by serving the country and serving Allah women gain a meaningful existence (Chapter XII):

> Since I was appointed *nu ahong*, I have never wavered from the principle of loving the motherland and our religion. Carefully observing my responsibilities, I have dedicated all my efforts, however insignificant, to the service of the Party, the country and to religion with the help of the limited knowledge I have acquired, thus gaining trust, respect, and admiration from our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Appendix I

Profiles of Two Leading Women's Mosques and their Religious Leadership

The personal quality of a *nu ahong* (woman *ahong)* and *nu shetou* (women's mosque administrator) must be considered one of the most important factors to account not only for the impact a women's mosque may have on its congregation, but also on the potential of a mosque for development. Highlighted in the following profiles are believing women whose heroism and piety inspire women around them with renewed interest in religious affairs and a determination to press their case in society. Albeit brief, an introduction to the work of Du Shuzhen *Ahong* and Dan Ye *Shetou* at Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou, and to Kou Xiuzhi *Ahong and* Liu Fengying *Ahong* at Huhehot *Nusi* in Huhehot, will add to our understanding as to how the personal quality and agency of leading women shape the culture of women's mosques.

Beidajie Women's Mosque, Zhengzhou, Henan Province

The *shetou* (administrators) responsible for Beidajie *Nusi* are all under the age of sixty and have received at least a primary school education. Their common priority is to improve the standing in society of their beloved Beidajie *Nusi*, and in this quest the knowledge and competence of Du *Nu Ahong* and Dan *Nu Shetou* have proven particularly important to the success of Beidajie *Nusi*.

Du Shuzhen *Ahong*, 73 years old (1998), was born in Kaifeng, Henan. Her mother died when she was young, and she lived in her aunt's house at Nanren Village in Zhongmou County. She learned the scriptures between the age of eight to fourteen, and was married at fifteen. Her husband died when she was only eighteen. She refused to marry again and despite strong opposition from her natal family, she continued to study the Koran at the famous Wangjiahutong *Nusi*. Obviously endowed with steely determination, she rejected help from her father and maintained herself by sewing.

When Du Shuzhen became a *hailifan* (an advanced student of the scriptures)

at eighteen, her teacher (Hu *Ahong)* was already over seventy, and she was put in charge of seventeen or eighteen younger *hailifan*. At that time, female *hailifan* only studied Persian and did not participate in the *chuanyi* ceremony (graduation ceremony) upon completion of their study. Du Shuzhen commenced her office as an *ahong* at the age of twenty-six. She resided at the Shifo Village Mosque in Zhengzhou for over four years, at the villages of Jinzhai and Yanqu in Xingyang for twelve years, and at Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou for fifteen years. Having taught herself Chinese, she is able to read books and newspapers. During those years, she raised her late brother's four children on an *ahong*'s limited wage, supplemented by earnings from sewing.

Over 40 years spent in religious work have passed, and Du *Ahong* has gained respect from countless Muslims for her purity of devotion and her mission to develop the women's mosque as a religious centre. All her earnings and believers' *nietie* (alms) went to the construction of the *Nusi*. When Du became *ahong* in Beidajie *Nusi* in 1981, she immediately took action to raise money for the reconstruction of the *Nusi*. Upon hearing the news, individual Muslim women and women's mosques with close connections with Du *Ahong* rallied around the new cause. Thus a substantial part of the funds needed for the reconstruction came from *nietie* sent by other Muslim *fang* (parishes). Located in the biggest Muslim community in Zhengzhou, Beidajie *Nusi* can generally collect large amounts of donations by services such as washing *maiti* (washing of female corpses) and by *kaijing* (ceremonial blessings given at the invitation of a given family). It needs remembering that many an *ahong* of Du *Ahong'*s stature and learning refuses to tend to corpses as a duty below a learned *ahong'*s station. Du *Ahong* has never rejected any such request. In order to demonstrate her determination to see the reconstruction of the *Nusi* through to a successful end, Du *Ahong*, so the legend has it, did not leave the grounds of the *Nusi* for two years.

Du *Ahong* trained eight *ahong* in Beidajie *Nusi*: three have taken office in Kaifeng, one in Xian, and the others preside over smaller mosques in Henan. These women started to learn Persian when already in their fifties or sixties. Not surprisingly, even as *ahong* they are remaining in close contact with Beidajie *Nusi*. At present, Du *Ahong* is training a dozen of students. They are retired workers, thus financially independent, and place no financial burden on the *Nusi*.

Du *Ahong* went on her first pilgrimage trip in 1992, the first woman in Henan to go on a pilgrimage after government relaxation of restrictions. She made a second pilgrimage in 1996. Because of her noble character, strong determination and great leadership talent, Beidajie *Nusi* benefited from her reputation to such an extent that it has acquired a central position in the religious culture of women

in Central China.

Dan Ye, the director of the Administrative Committee of Beidajie *Nusi*, occupies an equally important place in the history of the rise of the *Nusi*. Dan Ye *Shetou* was born at Daxin Village in Boai County, Henan, on 27 December 1937. Dan's aunt was widowed young, and returned to her mother's house to study scriptures at the local mosque. Adopted by her aunt in childhood, Dan Ye regards her aunt as her real mother, and her surname was changed to the family name of her aunt's husband. Before the age of eight, Dan Ye studied major sections of the Koran, but she also attended Xiguan Primary School in Boai for nearly two years.

In 1946, her aunt took Dan Ye to Kaifeng where she began her religious study. After eight months, aunt and niece moved to Beidajie *Nusi* in Zhengzhou to continue with their religious education. In 1947, Dan took a first independent step when she registered in a school for refugees without asking for her aunt's permission. The school gave each student a bag of imported flour, a small financial assistance, and textbooks free of charge. When Dan Ye returned home, her aunt was reluctant to give permission, fearful that because of lack of security due to war conditions, some misfortune might befall the little girl on her way to school. However, Dan Ye insisted, and she studied in that school for over a year. Only in late 1948, when Communist forces finally triumphed in Zhengzhou, did she again take up study of the scriptures in the *Nusi*. However, her experience of secular education was to determine her fate.

In 1952, she commenced study in Shengda Middle School in spite of the *ahong*'s objections. Upon graduation in 1954, she again chose to attend a technical training school run by the Henan Bureau of Mechanics. She was assigned to work in the Transformer Plant in Zhengzhou and became its first technician. The factory director thought so highly of her that after a brief period of work in another plant, she was put in charge of the factory's technical work and remained a senior cadre until retirement in 1980. A year later, she opened a hardware store. Throughout her career, Dan Ye ran a large household; she had married a college graduate (of Hui nationality) in 1959, and born four children. Generally seen as the decision-maker, Dan enjoys unchallenged authority in her family.

But childhood memories of mosque life and its spirituality had never left Dan Ye. When Xiao *Ahong* had died in 1957, Dan's aunt took the office of *ahong* in Beidajie *Nusi*. Dan had therefore remained in touch with developments at the mosque during a time when her work experiences in a Han environment made her conscious of the need to develop religious activities on a sound economic footing and with the participation of the larger Muslim community. When she

retired, she was asked to take care of the Beidajie Mosque affairs. At that time, one Administrative Committee managed both the men's and women's mosque affairs. She was a deputy in the Committee and would express her opinions on affairs of both mosques. But her overriding interest was in the *Nusi* and since its independence, her sole interest was in turning the women's mosque into a fitting symbol for its excellency in religious and educational activities under Du *Ahong*. In this mammoth task, Dan's independence of judgement and self-reliance proved vital. The reconstruction of the *Nusi* was so successful largely due to Dan *Shetou'*s competence; she was in charge of the project from conceptualisation to arrangements for the banquet celebrating its completion. Ordinary women believers were inspired to offer financial and practical help. Other members of the *Nusi'*s Administrative Committee stood by her and not one woman complained about fatigue or, for that matter, about boredom. Now Dan *Shetou* is taking active measures to implement further development of the *Nusi* together with Du *Ahong* and its rapidly growing congregation of Muslim faithful.

Huhehot *Nusi*, Huhehot, Inner-Mongolia

The School run by Huhehot *Nusi* for young Muslim women is famous throughout Muslim communities in China, and is especially prominent in the Northwest. Many of its female graduates are now *jiaozhang* (teachers) in women's schools in Ningxia and Gansu. Some of these graduates have started women's religious classes in their own homes. Schools for old and middle-aged women, often with poor understanding of Islam, are particularly popular. Kou Xiuzhi *Ahong* and her family are an important force in this ever-growing influence of the School. But the local Muslim community as a whole, proud of the educational achievements of its School, contribute to students' fees and upkeep to the best of their ability.

Relatively little information is available about Kou *Ahong*, 67 years (1998) of age. She received three years of formal religious education in Huhehot when a young girl. Kou *Ahong* learned whatever male *hailifan* were required to study at that time, and in addition acquired literacy in Chinese. She became the first woman to take part in the *chuanyi* ceremony (graduation) in Huhehot in 1946 when she was only sixteen years of age. She was forced to work in a food processing plant for five years before more liberal religious policies made it possible to devote herself entirely to women's religious education. She took the office of *ahong* at Huhehot *Nusi* in 1989, and has set the foundation for a central site of women's Islamic education in China.

All of her seven children, six daughters and one son, follow Kou *Ahong'*s

example of diligent study. Her son Kang Mingjie added several years of study at Azhar University in Egypt. He had started as a teacher at a Hui school for young Muslims. Kou *Ahong'*s youngest daughter spent seven years furthering her education at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and subsequently worked for a Master's Degree.

Liu Fengying *Ahong* was the first woman to occupy the office *of ahong* at Huhehot *Nusi*. Aged seventy-five (1998), Liu *Ahong* is a member of the China Islamic Association, of the Standing Committee of the Inner Mongolia Islamic Association and of the Huhehot Islamic Association. Liu *Ahong* now presides at the *Nusi* of the Huhehot Great Mosque where her priority lies in the religious instruction of old and middle-aged women.

Liu Fengying's father was appointed *ahong* in Datong, Shanxi Province, when she was a young child. She studied Arabic and Persian from her father and other male *ahong* when she was eight. A *chuanyi* ceremony was held in her honour when she was sixteen, and she got married in the same year. At age nineteen, she travelled to a women's mosque, not far from the Shanxi border, Fengzhen *Nusi*, to set up classes for women. She returned to Huhehot in 1946 to work in religious education for twelve years (1946–1958). After taking part in the Anti-Illiteracy Campaign for about three years, she graduated with a primary school certificate in Chinese. Now she is able to read Chinese-language books and newspapers. In 1956, she went to Beijing for the National Day Celebration as a member of the Inner Mongolian Young People's Association, and was invited to talk to the Chairman Mao Zedong. Together with other delegates, she spent 75 days visiting and learning from dozens of advanced units all over the country. In 1959, she was interviewed by Mao again after attending the National Nationalities Conference. Liu *Ahong* was involved in secular work from 1958 onwards, when the political climate did not allow for religious careers, and retired in 1979. She was invited to become *ahong* in the Dong Mosque in Huhehot, from 1982 to September 1994. Since 1994, she has been performing her duties as an *ahong* in the Huhehot Great Mosque. During this period, she trained three *nu ahong* to take up religious instruction in Huhehot. Liu *Ahong* is widely admired and respected by Muslims for her long life of religious devotion and display of patient wisdom in the face of adversity and challenge.

Appendix II

Nusi in the Republican Era (1912–1949)

Under the influence of *zhongyuan* Muslims and the new cultural movement, people built *nusi* in many parts of the country. The following is a general description of *nusi* built in the Republican period:

Over one-hundred *nusi* or *nudian* were in existence in Henan alone. With Nanyang and Xinyang as exceptions (here few *nusi* were found), *nusi* or *nudian* were built in most Muslim communities in Central and North Henan; Kaifeng, Jiaozuo, Zhoukou, Zhengzhou and Luoyang had the most in number.

Based on investigations by Yang Zhanshan, about thirty-nine *nusi* in Shandong were built in the early days of the Republic, and mainly located in the West of the province. Five *nusi* in Jinan, Linqing and Jining were the subject of investigations during the 1930s (Yang Zhanshan, in Wong Qianlin, 1991; interview with Yang Zhanshan, May 1996).

During the same time, five *nusi* in Beijing were known to exist: Nujie *Nusi*, Leijiahutong *Nusi* at Chongwenmenwai, Sanlihe *Nusi* at Fucheng-menwai, Xicun *Nusi* at Deshengmenwai, and Guanyin *Nusi* at Chaoyang-menwai (Li & Feng, 1985:409–513).

The history of *nusi* in Tianjin is not clear. A male *ahong* working in a mosque in Shijiazhuang but whose native place is in Tianjin maintained that there were six *nusi* in Tianjin, all located in the city proper (interview, May 1997). A *nu ahong* working in a *nusi* in Jinan, Shandong, said she was a *hailifan* in the 1950s, and when her teacher was invited to be the *ahong* of Duishuili Women's Mosque in Tianjin, she went there with her (interview, May 1996). If there was a *nusi* in the 1950s, its history may have begun back in the Republican period.

In Hebei, *nusi* are attached to most mosques. We cannot tell exactly how many *nusi* there were throughout the province in the Republican period. However, we know many *nusi* were functioning around Shijiazhuang and Baoding, and at least dozens of *nusi* were built in Handan, a county next to Henan and Shandong (Li & Feng, 1985:520, 1356–1357; field-interviews in Shandong in the course of 1996, 1997).

A comparatively small population of Hui people live in Shanxi, but its many *nusi* show the influence of Henan. Most *nusi* were located in Changzhi and Datong. At present, we cannot tell the total number of *nusi* in the province, but it is said that *nusi* were built in Changzhi and Datong as early as late Qing Dynasty. In the Republican period, most mosques in these two areas had *nusi* attached to them. Taiyuan *Nusi* (then called *Nuxue*) was set up in the 1920s. At that time, the head of the Educational Bureau in Shanxi province called upon the Hui people to establish the Taiyuan Islamic Preachers Association, found night schools and preach religious doctrines. At first, it was done without separating men from women. Later, a *nuxue* was started in a house which belonged to the men's mosque, and Liang *Nu Ahong* was invited to teach Muslim women only. Liang was from Beijing and had studied the scriptures in Kaifeng, Henan. The *nuxue* continued into the late 1940s (Li & Feng, 1985:1358–1361; interview with Zhao Weiping, Shanxi Islamic Association Secretary, May 1997).

Two *nusi* were built in Xian, Shaanxi, encouraged by Muslims who had moved there from Henan. Henan Muslims also built three or four *nusi* in Gansu Province, located in Lanzhou City and Pingliang County (Ding Guoyong, 1992:79; interview with Ding Guoyong, Yinchuan, Ningxia, October 1995; interview with Ba *Nu Ahong*, Wuzhi, Henan, December 1996).

In Inner Mongolia, most *nusi* are located to the east of Baotou City. Three *Nusi* were built in Huhehot in the Republican period, namely, Tongdaojie *Nusi*, Xinchengdao *Nusi*, and Xinpengjie *Nusi*. An over 70 year old *nu ahong* in Huhehot remembers that when she was a little girl, she went with her father to study the scriptures in Datong. At the age of nineteen (1941) she worked as an *ahong* in Fengzhen *Nusi*, teaching scriptures. Her experience indicates that *nusi* could be found in Muslim communities between Huhehot to Datong in Shanxi (Interview, June 1997).

Heilongjiang Province had two *nusi*, one in Harbin, the other in Longjiang (Li & Feng, 1985:1364–1365; field-interview in Harbin, May 1997).

Shanghai boasted of six *nuxue*: Zhangjiahuayuan *Nuxue*, Gaodunlu *Nuxue*, Xicangqiao *Nuxue*, Taicanglu *Nuxue*, Shunchanglu *Nuxue* and Baiyufang *Nuxue (Shanghai Musilin*, 1994, No.3).

We know of three *nusi* in Nanjing, namely, Dahuixiang *Nusi*, Haiximen *Nusi*, and Changlejie *Nusi*, all built in the early days of the Republican period (Li & Feng, 1985:1541–1556).

Baolinsi *Nuxue* in Suzhou was founded in the twelfth year of the Republican period (1923). There are two *nusi* in Yangzhou, one in the city proper, the other at Taifu Bridge (Li & Feng, 1985:1563).

In the 1940s, a *nuxue* was set up in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province. It was also

sponsored by Muslims from Henan (Li & Feng, 1985:651, 1557–1567).

A *nuxue* was once started in Chengdu city, Sichuan Province. The date of its establishment is not clear and it was ‘transformed into a Mosque Women’s Primary school’ in the Republican period (Li & Feng, 1985:1675).

During the Qing Dynasty, a *nusi* was built in Guilin City, Guangxi (Li & Feng, 1985:1644–1645).

According to a Hui researcher, Ding Guoyong, *nusi* existed formerly in Changsha, Hunan, Wuhu and Jieshou in Anhui, and Jilin City in Jilin, their circumstances and exact numbers remain as yet unknown (Ding Guoyong, 1992:79).

Appendix III

Questioning Hui and Han Women and Men on Quality of Life (Survey: October/November 1996)

Assisted by the Demographic Department of Henan Statistics Bureau, a simple questionnaire was distributed among over 250 Hui and Han people from five cities and counties in Henan (Nanyang, Luoyang, Zhengzhou, Zhoukou and Hebi) to answer questions on education, marriage and reproduction. Out of 109 Hui informants, 53 were male and 56 were female; 39 were above the age of 41 (35.78%); 42 had received high school or higher education (38.53%); 45 were engaged in farming or resided in the countryside (41.28%). Out of a total of 56 Hui*zu* women, 75% were under the age of 40, 43% received high school or higher education, and 39% lived in the countryside; of 53 Hui*zu* men, 53% were under 40, 34% had received high school or higher education, and 43% lived in the countryside. Of the 142 Han people surveyed, 68 were male, 74 were female; 36 were above the age of 41 (25.35%); 80.98% received high school or higher education (including vocational and professional training education); 16 engaged in farming (11.27%).

Both ethnic groups shared certain characteristics: relative youth, work largely outside the agricultural sector, and access to education. Interpretation of these data is thus largely relevant to this social class. However, even given these limitations, the survey still allows for observations of differences based on ethnicity and gender.

Interpretation: There is little difference to be noted between the two ethnic groups of young or middle-aged professional respondents on the need for solid, higher education for their children. Only on the issue of religious education, including advanced religious education, does the influence of Islam show up in contrasting responses. Women of the Hui nationality place greater importance on higher education for their children (such as study abroad, graduate study, or advanced religious education).

TABLE 1: Expectations concerning children's education

Unit: %

	middle school	*high school*	*poly-technic school*	*university*	*post-graduate*	*study abroad*	*primary relig. educat.*	*advanc. relig. educat.*
Hui:	3.7	7.3	10.1	54.1	16.5	19.3	4.6	23.9
male	5.7	13.2	5.7	60.4	11.3	15.1	1.9	22.6
female	1.8	1.8	14.3	48.2	21.4	30.4	7.1	25.0
Han: male & fem.	2.8	1.4	4.2	46.5	21.1	24.6	2.1	2.8

Interpretation: A marked difference can be noted in the two groups' preference for certain occupations for their children. Whilst Han overwhelmingly opt for scientific and managerial professions, respect for teaching and medical professions as well as religious careers mark preferences of Hui respondents. It is also noteworthy that Hui women place more importance on religious careers whereas men stress the medical profession.

TABLE 2: Expectations concerning children's professions

Unit: %

	scient. & techn. special	*head of admin & state owned busin.*	*white-collar work*	*com-merce*	*service sect.*	*agri., forestr. Animal husb. & fishing*	*man. work*	*teach.*	*doctor*	*relig. prof.*	*other*
Hui:	20.2	9.2		11.9		3.7	10.1	23.9	24.8	22.0	
male	18.9	7.6		9.4		3.8	7.6	20.8	32.1	18.9	
female	21.4	10.7		14.3		3.6	12.5	26.8	17.9	25.0	
Han: m&f	43.0	25.4	2.1	1.4	0.7	1.4	2.1	11.3	23.2		1.4

Interpretation: Both ethnic groups value modern education and downplay material aspiration. But marked differences obtain in the value respondents place on ethnic identity and religious faith which constitutes a clear priority with Hui informants. Han respondents, in contrast, stress secular education and vocational skills, reflecting the peculiar ethnic and religious minority position of the former.

The gender factor intervenes in ethnic and religious values where more Hui women than men consider preservation of a traditional way of life to be important and are outnumbered by men when it comes to prioritizing Islamic faith.

TABLE 3: Life's Priorities and values

Unit: %

	ethnic traditions	*religious faith*	*modern (secular) education*	*vocational skills*	*wealth*
Hui:	69.72	45.87	69.72	27.52	5.50
male	58.49	50.94	69.81	37.74	5.66
female	80.36	41.07	69.64	17.86	5.36
Han: m&f	23.24	0.70	73.24	45.07	5.63

Interpretation: When it comes to the ideal age for marriage, ethnicity and religion are a less divisive factor than gender. Women favour on the whole late marriage, men are more inclined to advocate early marriage.

TABLE 4: When to get married

Unit: %

	age 18–20	*21–25*	*25–30*	*over 30*
Hui:	2.75	60.55	34.86	
male	3.77	66.04	26.42	
female	1.79	55.36	42.86	
Han: m&f	1.41	49.30	40.85	3.52

Other questions which asked about mixed marriages show the following responses. When it comes to intermarriage, 23.85% of Hui respondents are opposed, in contrast to 8.45% of Han respondents objecting. Even where Hui agree to the idea of mixed marriage, this agreement is predicated on the partner's respect for tradition and readiness to convert to Islam.

Interpretation: As for the number of children preferred, both groups prefer two. But a marginally higher number of Han respondents shows a preference for more than two children and for both a son and daughter. More Hui women than

men desire two children. Here political correctness in responding to official forms may also play a part.

TABLE 5: Ideal number and sex of children

Unit: %

	one child	*two*	*three*	*prefer boy*	*prefer girl*	*want boy and girl*
Hui:	31.19	57.80	1.83	17.43	13.76	51.38
male	32.08	50.94	3.77	16.98	13.21	47.17
female	30.36	64.29		17.86	14.29	55.36
Han: m&f	23.94	70.42	3.52	8.45	15.49	69.01

Other questions, which related to the ideal reproductive age, elicited similar responses from both groups. The majority of informants feels it is best to bear a child at the age of 22 (79.58% Han and 77.06% Hui). 57.04% of Han and 49.54% of Hui respondents think it better to finish childbearing before the age of 30; 14.08% Han and 6.42% Hui consider it best to complete childbearing before the age of 40. 14.08% Han and 7.34% Hui respondents prefer for fate to determine fertility patterns.

Interpretation: Both ethnic groups agree on the need for eugenics and fewer childbirths (80.28% Han and 79.82% of Hui respondents). More Han respondents value freedom of choice concerning reproduction (14.79% as opposed to 5.50% Hui informants). The religious factor is clearly present in the role given by Muslims to God when it comes to deciding a baby's sex. Women's submission to higher forces is apparent in the high number of female respondents who leave sex and number of progeny to God. The positive result of submission to God's plan is an overall acceptance by the Muslim population of female children (also see Chapter V).

TABLE 6: Controlling fertility

Unit: %

	the more the better	*agreeing to eugenics*	*God decides a baby's sex*	*one has right to decide timing and number*
Hui:		79.82	39.45	5.50
male		77.36	37.74	5.66
female		82.14	41.07	5.38
Han: m&f	0.70	80.28	6.34	14.79

Interpretation: Whereas teachers feature as important role models for all members of the two groups, Hui men constitute the highest percentage, showing a traditional respect of, and preoccupation with, education among the Hui male population. Hui women and Han respondents identify parents as foremost influence, indicative of Hui women's deep entrenchment in familial culture and socialisation. Religious role models play a part only with Hui respondents, with men's closer involvement with mosque-based life shown up in the high percentage of men identifying such sources of influence as opposed to a lower percentage of women.

TABLE 7: Role models

Unit: %

	teachers	*parents*	*relatives*	*friends*	ahong *(or other religious professionals)*	*others*
Hui:	50.46	58.72		0.92	12.84	
male	56.60	56.60		1.88	20.75	
female	44.64	60.71			5.66	
Han: m&f	38.03	74.65	1.41	7.75		8.45

Appendix IV

Unpublished Documentation on Central China's Muslim Culture and Women's Lives (lodged with Henan Provincial Library, Zhengzhou, Henan Province)[1]

On Muslim Women's Way of Life (Incl. Dress and Adornment)

Bai Zongzheng (Dec. 1985) *Kaifeng Yisilan Jiaopai Jianjie*. Kaifeng Wenshi Ziliao, Di Er Ji
Bao Shaoxuan (Oct. 1988) *Huizu Kaizaijie Jishi*. Guangzhou Wenshi Ziliao, Di Wuji
Guan Shouzhi (Jan. 1989) *Qian Tan Huizu Fengsu Xiguan*. Wugangqu Wenshi Ziliao, Di Sanji
Li Xian (June 1989) *Luoyang Huizu Renmin Xisu*. Luoyang Wenshi Ziliao, Di Liu Ji
Li Yugai (Oct. 1989) *Huizu Xisu*. Xixia Wenshi Ziliao, Di Yiji
Ma Hongliang (May 1987) *Luoyang Huizuren de Quming, Zhaili he Hunjia*. Xigong Wenshi Ziliao, Di Yiji
Ma Yitang (Sept. 1988) *Zhoukou Huizu Renmin de Hunsang Xisu*. Zhoukou Wenshi Ziliao, Di Wuji
Minquan Xianzhi Bangongshi (May 1988) *Huimin Xisu*. Minquan Wenshi Ziliao, Di Yiji
Wang Zhengxing (Dec. 1992) *Lushi de Huizu yu Yisilanjiao*. Lushi Wenshi Ziliao, Di Wuji
Wei Wenying (Oct. 1990) *Guancheng Huizu de Zongjiao Xinyang*. Guancheng Wenshi Ziliao, Di Frji
Yan Yuqing & Guo Ruyue (1987) *Fangcheng Yisilanjiao Yu Fangcheng Huijiao*. Fangcheng Wenshi Ziliao, Di Siji
Zhao Juxian (Oct. 1993) *Shangqiuxian Huimin de Fengsu Xiguan*. Shangqiu Wenshi Ziliao, Di Shiji

On Muslim Women's Culture, Education, Hygiene, Health and Sports

Bao Guoxian (July 1987) *Zhoukou Huizu Ming Lao Zhongyi Shuluo*. Zhoukou Wenshi Ziliao, Di Siji
Henansheng Yuzhoushi Minzu Zongjiao Shiwuju (Jan. 1989) *Yuzhou Huizuzhi ji Zongjiaozhi*.
Jin Heng (Dec. 1991) *Kangzhan Qijian Beiyaocun Yiwu jiaoyu de Yixie Qingkuang*. Chanhe Wenshi Ziliao, Di Erji
Li Yugai (Oct. 1989) *Huizu Xisu Xixia*. Wenshi Ziliao. Di Yiji
Yang Shaohua & Hu Zhengsheng (Dec. 1992) *Suipingxian Huizude Lishi Chuantong he Fengsu Xiguan*. Suiping Wenshi Ziliao, Di Sanji
Yang Wenguang & Fan Yumei (Feb. 1993) *Fan Flaogu Ahong*. Zhengzhou Wenshi Ziliao, Di Shisiji
Yao Shufang (April 1988) *Nu Zhibushuji Jin Rongzhen*. Tongbai Wenshi Ziliao, Di Erji
Yi Feng (May 1988) *Minquan Huizu Xingshi Xuanjie*. Minquan Wenshi Ziliao, Di Yiji
Zhengxie Henansheng Luoyangshi Chanhe Huizuqu Wenshi Weiyuanhui (Oct. 1990) *Chanhe Wenshi*

Ziliao. Di Yiji

On Women's Mosques and their Evolution

Zhengzhou Bei Da Qingzhen Si and other Zhengzhou ivomen's mosques

Guancheng Huizu Quzhi, Guancheng Huizu; published in September 1989, the book gives a detailed introduction to the evolution and development of the *Bei Da Qingzhen Nu Si*. Its addenda, *1935 Nian Zhengxian Cheng Nei Nu Qingzhen Si Gaikuang* and *1985 Nian Guancheng Huizuqu Nu Si Gaikuang*, record the names, locations, dates of construction, the names of all the *nu jiaozhang* (female religious personnel), and of other such features, relevant to the known history of women's mosques in Zhengzhou.

Wei Wenying (October 1990) *Guancheng Huizude Zongjiao Xinyang*. Guancheng Wenshi Ziliao, Di Erji. The article gives a comparatively detailed introduction to the historical heritage and development of the *Bei Da Qingzhen Nu Si*, and of the other women's mosques in the area, and thus provides important data for the study of women's mosques in Zhengzhou City.

Zhengzhou Wenwu Zhi; published in July 1961, this book gives the first ever general introduction to the *Bei Da Qingzhen Si*.

Women's Mosques elsewhere in Henan Province

Jia Tianyun & Gong Jieying (Nov. 1994) *Dongguan Qingzhen Si*. Xigong Wenshi Ziliao, Di Baji.

Jin Heng (Dec. 1991) *Kangzhan Qijian Beiyaocun Yiwu Xiaoxue de Yixie Qingkuang*. Chanhe Wenshi Ziliao, Di Erji.

Li Liping (Nov. 1994) *Xigong Qingzhen Si de Bianjian*. Xigong Wenshi Ziliao, Di Baji

Luoyangshi Chanhe Zu Qu Zhi (gongyuan 1605–1985), Henan Renmin Chubanshe. Printed in December 1989, the book gives a comprehensive introduction to the construction of the Dongguan Women's Mosque and of Beiyao Women's Mosque in Luoyang during the Republican era.

Ren Yongxiang (Sept. 1989) *Weihui Huizu Gaikuang*. Weihui Wenshi Ziliao, Di Erji.

Sun Junshan (Oct. 1993) *Xiguan Qingzhen Si*. Shangqiu Wenshi Ziliao, Di Qiji.

Wang Zhengxing (Dec. 1992) *Lushi de Huizu yu Yisilanjiao*. Lushi Wenshi Ziliao, Di Wuji.

Yao Depu (Oct. 1987) *Xuchang Cheng Nei Huimin Qingzhen Si*. Xuchangxian Wenshi Ziliao, Di Yiji.

Finally, *Kaifeng Wenshi Ziliao* (Oct. 1990), Di Shiji. This collection contains an article by the historian Hu Yunsheng ('Kaifengshi Yisilanjiao Qingzhen Si') which will be of use to scholars interested in the historical evolution of women's mosques in Kaifeng. Other essays by Mu Dequan, Lan Zhenshan, and Miao Yunchang, also touch upon the presence of women's mosques.

On Documentation of Stele Inscriptions To Be Found in Women's Mosques

'Qinyangxian Shuinanguan Qingzhen Nu Si Chong Xiu Nu Si Bei Ji': erected in April 1984, now kept in the Shuinanguan *Qingzhen Nu Si*, in Qinyang County, Henan Province.

'Qingzhen Nu Si Luochen Beiji', inscribed and erected in August 1986, now kept in the Shuinanguan *Qingzhen Nu Si*, Qinyang County, Henan Province.

'Qinyang Shuibeiguan Qingzhen Nu Si Beiguan Nu Si Diantang Xiufu Beiji', inscribed and erected in April 1987, now kept in the Shuibeiguan *Qingzhen Nu Si*, Qinyang County, Henan Province.

'Shishe Dimu Qingzhen Si Kaishe Jingwen Nu Xuexiao Beiji', inscribed and erected in the winter of 1924; 'Qingzhen Si Nu Xue Beiji', inscribed and erected in the spring of 1931. Now both tablets are stored in the Shiyangjie *Qingzhen Si*, Xiangcheng County, Henan.

'Wangjia Hutong Nu Xuetang Beiwen' Liangtong: inscribed in the fourth year of Guangxu (1878), the stone tablet is kept in the Wangjia Hutong *Qingzhen Nu Si* in Kaifeng City, Henan Province.

'Xiangchengxian Nanguan Qingzhen Si Xiujian Shimo Beiji', inscribed and erected on 30 January 1989,

and now kept in the Nanguan *Qingzhen Si*, Xiangcheng County, Henan Province.

Note

1 Reference materials relating to women's mosques were given to the Henan Provincial Library by Hu Yunsheng, Department of History, Zhengzhou University; their cataloguing was supervised by Ding Yanmin, Henan Provincial Library.

All reference materials concerning local women Muslims' way of life, education, hygiene, health, as well as background materials on the evolution and development of women's mosques, are lodged with the Henan Local History Documentation Section, Henan Provincial Library. They are the responsibility of Ding Yanmin, Henan Provincial Library, who also contributed this Appendix.

Glossary

Transliterated terms reflect Central Chinese regional linguistic characteristic and thus differ at times from other glossaries, e.g., Gladney (1991) to whom we readily acknowledge debts of gratitude for his groundbreaking work only those terms significant to women's identity as Muslim and Chinese are included here.

(C) = Chinese; (P) = Persian (A) = Arabic

ahmu (A)	ordinary Muslim believer
ahong (P)	combines various functions, including teacher, scholar, religious leader in charge of mosque; since late-Ming, used to refer to religious instructors; since late-18th century applied also to Muslims with advanced religious learning
ahong nainai (P/C)	form of address for elderly nu ahong
Alabo ren (A/C)	Arabs
Anla (A)	Allah
aosa (C)	Porridge with dried fruits and nuts, specially prepared for Muslim feast days
baba (C)	also called shaihai, a title conferred on prestigious elders, scholars and teachers (2) Sufi menhuan term for son of the saint
baizizan (C)	one-hundred character tribute to faith and duties in Islam, attributed to the first Ming Emperor Taizu (1368–1399)
bangke (P)	calling on worshippers to join prayers, also known as xuanli; not allowed for nusi worship
bangkelou (P/C)	also called wangyuelou; the minaret; although traditional restriction prohibited the building of minarets for nusi, more recent nusi architecture incorporates these as an integral feature of Arabic-style ornamentation
bazhai(C)	also known as fengzhai, bizhai, or jiezhai, Ramadan fast

biaozhunde Hui guniang (C)	a perfect (pious) Hui Muslim girl
bidaerti (A)	bid' a, the term is used in a positive sense (good innovation) or in a derogatory meaning (aberration, heterodoxy), depending on a given Muslim tradition
buchengban (C)	obligation to participate in collective prayer ('stand in line') does not apply to women (see chengban); but despite rule that women worship individually, women in nusi pray collectively, with the nu ahong guiding in the middle of the front row and facing the same direction as the congregation (Zhang Hongtao, 1924)
buchuban (C)	restriction on nu ahong's leading of collective prayer lit., not be standing outside worshipping group
chaojin (C)	hadj, pilgrimage to Mecca; pilgrims are called haji (A)
chengban (C)	standing in line during collective worship under guidance of (male) ahong who stands at the front, facing the same direction as the congregation; see also buchengban and buchuban
chuanyi/guazhang (C)	ceremony of ordination of ahong; (lit.) put on garment and hang up the banner; traditionally, men often wore green robes nowadays replaced by overcoats; many graduating women wear green robes and gaitou; neighbouring mosques present congratulatory embroidered banners in red silk which are hung on the wall
chusan (C)	colloquial expression for aim giving, whether for welfare purpose or restoration of mosque
chuyou (C)	age of initiation into Muslim adulthood
dadan (P)	bride's vow at nikaha ceremony
daihunqi (C)	period lasting from husband's kouhuan to wife's third menstruation
daike (C)	banquet to welcome guests
daiwei nu ahong (C)	a temporary nu ahong, not under contract
daixingde furen (C)	evil-natured woman
dajie (C)	term of address for older woman
dajing (C)	also referred to as wusili (A); complete ritual ablution
Dashi (P)	or tazi, used during Tang/Song Dynasties to refer to the Arab Empire

difang shizhi (C)	local history
duiyue (C)	day of commemorating a deceased Muslim
duli (C)	independence
dunya (A)	mortal life, all secular possessions and yearnings such as official rank, wealth, beautiful women
duozaihai (P)	purgatory
enan shidai (C)	Bai Shouyi: ‘time of adversity’ for Hui Muslims, 14th century-1911
erdebai (A/C)	the first prayer after Qurban and Ramadan
erlin (A)	those with advanced religious knowledge
ershifu (C)	ahong responsible for general duties
fanfang (C)	early Muslim quarters for Arabic and Persian settlers
fang (C)	mosque neighbourhood or parish
fangzhongshu (C)	knowledge of sexual techniques
fanke (C)	foreign guest, foreigner
fanshen (C)	undergo political transformation
fanzhang (C)	elder or head of foreign settlement
fazi neixin (C)	a faith which springs from within
fei ziwoxing (C)	self-abnegation
fengjian zhidude yapo (C)	feudal oppression
fengzhai (C)	beginning of Islamic fasting
fucong wangfa (C)	obey imperial laws; be loyal subjects
fudao (C)	moral code specifically applied to women’s conduct
funu (C)	women; paradigmatic Maoist construct of liberated Socialist womanhood
funu diwei (C)	women’s place/status
funuhui (C)	local women’s association
funu jingxueban (C)	scripture classes for women
gaibulikailedan (P)	bridegroom, s vow at nikaha ceremony
gaitou (C)	Islamic head-dress for women which covers hair and neck, leaving face exposed
gedimu(pai) (A/C)	earliest Sunni Islam in China, traditionalist (school); see laojiao
gongping (C)	justice
guerbangjie (A/C)	festival of great sacrifice, ‘Idul-Adha
guizhen (C)	see wuchang, death; also means returning to spiritual home (Allah)
guiyi (C)	initiation into Buddhist religions; any religious conversion

guli wuyuan (A)	alienation
gulanjing (A/C)	Koran
halali (A)	halal, lawful
hailifan (A)	khalifah, student of the Koran, usually preparing to become ahong
haina (A)	Henna
haiting (A)	also haitie; this particular section of the Koran enjoyed great popularity among Chinese Muslims between 18th and 20th century
haji (A)	one who has performed the basic Muslim duty of making a pilgrimage to Mecca
halamu (A)	haram, religious taboo, unlawful
houshi (C)	afterlife
huanbu (C)	making up for missed prayer
huanshui (C)	colloquial expression for dajing, complete Islamic ritual ablution after sexual act
huan yici shui, you wolide	sex is as good as religious
pinji (C)	cultivation
Huihui (C)	historical reference to Muslims; Hui nationality
huijiao (C)	early term for Islam, also referred to as huihui jiaomen; since 1956 no longer in official use
Huijiao Jiaoyangsuo/yuan (C) \	House of Refuge and Relief for Muslims
Huijiao Jiujiyuan (C)	Muslim Emergency Refuge
Huijiaotu (C)	a Hui Muslim
huili (C)	the first prayer after Qurban and Ramadan which is mandatory only for men
Huimin (C)	Hui nationality, those who believe in Islam
huren (C)	ancient Chinese term for non-Han minorities living in Northern and Western regions
hutubailou (A/C)	also called mingbaier or xuanyutai, platform or pulpit used for preaching sermons; no such pulpit exists in nusi, and nu ahong give sermons sitting in a circle with, or in front of, the congregation
jiafu bu jian wainan (C)	women must not mix with non-kin males
jiaohejing (C)	(Yuan) copper mirror with sexually explicit drawing
jiaomen (C)	colloquial expression which has double meaning: (1) Islamic religion, (2) state of religious belief
jiaogui (C)	Islamic doctrines
jiaozhang (C)	or kaixue ahong; indicates high degree of of learning, title is conferred on teachers in Islamic Colleges

jiating daode (C)	ethics governing family life
jie/jiejing (C) /	or ganjing; purity; concept at the core of pious Muslim women's conduct, underpinning sexual segregation
jingming (C)	Islamic name
jingshi (C)	a respectful title conferred on learned scholars (mastery of Arabic and/or Persian; profound theological and legal learning); created in late-Ming as the title of junshi; male scholars are called jingshi, female scholars are called nu jingshi or nu junshi
jingtang jiaoyu (C)	mosque-based religious education
jingtangyu (C)	'Hui speech' which incorporates Islamic Arabic and Persian terms; used in sermons, woerci, and religious education but also in everyday life
jinguo yingxiong (C)	heroine
jingwei (C)	veneration of the divine
jingxia (C)	washing of lower parts of body
jingxueyuan (C)	Islamic college, run by China Islamic Association
jinshi (C)	secular and this-worldly existence
jiu shehui (C)	feudal (pre-1949) and patriarchal society
jue hou (C)	to severe the family line; severance from prospect of afterlife in paradise
Juli (C)	main prayer of week on Friday
kaijing (C)	chanting of scriptures at public or private religious rites; male and female ahong chant different texts
kailian (C)	removing unwanted facial hair, done often prior to marriage
kaizhaijie (C)	'Idul-Fitr, the festival of fast-breaking
kang-tonghua (C)	Bai Gui: Muslims between resistance and assimilation in China
kanshou wangfa (C)	obey the imperial (national) law
kaoyan (C)	subjecting someone to trial and tribulation
keguanxing (C)	objectivity
kefan (A)	or kafan; the white cotton shroud in which to wrap the corpse; men have three parts, women have five parts
kouhuan (A)	verbal renunciation of spouse, repeated twice it announces the state of divorce; (2) promise to a dying relative (3) permission

kufoule (A)	kufr, in its original meaning: apostasy or infidelity; (indig.) used to refer to religious ignorance and superstition
laojiao/laopai (C)	literally, 'Old teaching[5] colloquial expression for gedimu, early Sunni traditionalist school
laoshouxing (C)	god of longevity
li (C)	the 'protocol' of an ideational system which shapes the historical subject
libai zhishi (C)	ritual knowledge
li hufutan bai (C/P/C)	observing evening prayer
lingshui (C)	washing of the corpse, usually done by the children of the dead, directed by a mosque sishifu (menial) rather than the male ahong whereas nu ahong often wash corpse themselves
maikeluhe (A)	actions that are impolite and to be avoided, but not sinful; ghost; pest
maiti (A)	corpse, mayyty; colloquially referred to as wangren
maiziqian (C)	the share of one's income to donate to relief of poor on 'Idul-Fitr, the festival of fast-breaking; to be offered in cash or in kind
mania (A)	also known as hailifan, students preparing to become ahong
maozi (C)	ubiquitous (white) round cap worn by older Muslim women and men, in Muslim settlements by all adult Muslims
menhuan (C)	'saintly descent group or school,' socio-political institution based upon the family of the saint and his followers
miansha (C)	head-scarf (worn as religious dress)
ming (C)	in Chinese Islam: innate to human beings
minzu shenfen (C)	ethnic identity/status
minzu yishi (C)	ethnic consciousness
mixitu (C)	(Yuan, Ming, Qing) coin depicting sexual intercourse used for sex education
muanjin (A)	one who calls (male) Muslims to prayer
nanren shi Alaboren, nuren shi Zhongguoren (C)	Arab husbands, Chinese wives
nansi/qingzhen nansi (C) /	men's mosque
nanxiao (C)	Koranic school for male students
nanzi wuxue, yizong jiao zuo furen (C)	men steeped in ignorance, [their souls] shall [acquire] female shape
neibu (C)	confidential, internal matter

neiren (C)	insider, persons of the same nationality
neizaide zuoyong (C)	intrinsic factor/function
nian bailati (C/A)	‘Day of Pardoning’, 14th night of 8th Islamic month; Muslims invite ahong to chant the scriptures to repent for past misdeeds and affirmation of good deeds; on such occasions, alms are offered
nian pinganjing (C)	invitation to male and female ahong to pray for protection against disaster and receive blessings
nietie (A)	Muslim benevolence; aims, donations
nikaha (A)	vow of commitment read at Islamic wedding ceremony
nu ahong (C/P)	female religious professional who usually presides over a nusi and whose functions may comprise teaching, ritual guidance, praying, giving sermons, counselling, political and social representation, see ahong
nu jiaozhang (C)	a traditional form of address for a learned woman teacher of Islam, see jiaozhang
nu junshi (C)	female Islamic scholar of senior rank
nu libaidian (C)	or nudian, nu dadian, nu shidian; prayer room set aside for women within a mosque courtyard
nuren dedao ziyou (C)	women attaining independence
nurenjing (C)	historically, compiled for general religious education, now used in female education, the so-called Women’s Koran comprises five textbooks in Persian, Arabic and Chinese for the use of nu ahong and female Muslims in Central China: (1) Sipianyaodao (Fansili) was translated by Zhang Zhong from Suzhou in late Ming/early Qing, considered the first Chinese translation for men unable to read Persian; (2) Jiaokuanjieyao (Muximati), comp, by Ma Boliang (3) Oumudai, in two translations (by Ding Yunhui and by the Yunnan ahong Ma Lianyuan, entitled Qingzhen Yuzhu); (4) Fouzu; and (5) Hageyege. Three textbooks are in use in Yunnan. In the 1930s, Ma Lianyuan’s descendants published an Arabic version; and in the late

	1970s, another descendant brought out a Chinese version.
nuse (C)	female sexuality
nu shaoma (C/A)	or nusi, popularly used in Jinan, Shandong to refer to the smaller size of many nusi
nu shengren (C)	female saints
nusi/qingzhen nusi (C) /	women's mosque; a site of ablution, worship and religious education presided over by a nu ahong and intended for the exclusive use of women
nuxing xinlixue (C)	female psychology
nuxue (C)	s Koranic school; historically, term referred also to nusi
nuzi ayu xuexiao (C)	girls' school with Arabic curriculum
nuzi jingxue(xiao) (C)	or nu xuetang, nu xuewu, qingzhen nuzi xueyuan, nuxiao; see nuxue
pingdeng (C)	equality
pingheng (C)	equilibrium
pinji (C)	also known as pinwei or dengji: ranks of angels, saintly messengers and prophets venerated in Islam; can also refer to classification of Muslims in heaven
Pusaman (C)	(since at least Song) reference to woman of Arabic or Persian descent
qiancheng (C)	devoutness
qianding (C)	human life ordained by God
qigong (C)	ancient theory of breathing exercises
Qincha	historical reference to Muslims from Central Asia
qinggan rentong (C)	emotional identification
qingliangde (C)	colloquial expression which refers to pious and sincere Muslims
qingzhen (C)	Islamic 'purity and truth'
qingzhen nuxue (C)	see nuxue
qingzhensi (C)	mosque
qingzhenyan (C)	also known as diyan; translated from the Arabic kalimah al tayibah (true words) and expressed in the confession of belief in Allah and His prophet; initiation into the faith requires recital of zuozhengyan and qingzhenyan
quanyi (C)	rights and interests
renji (C)	Islamic understanding of the highest ethical conduct adapted from classical Chinese

	philosophy
saiwabu (A)	merit points bestowed by Allah on benevolent Muslims; term also used to express gratitude to charitable Muslims, calling on Allah to bless benefactors
san-ba (C)	International Women's Day
sanban ahong (C/P)	ahong not contracted to mosque whose duties encompass chanting of scriptures, and presiding over wedding and funeral ceremonies
sangang wuchang (C)	Confucian code of social ethics
Semu (ren) (	(Yuan) tribes from West/Central Asia, among them many Muslims
shaomao (A)	a small mosque
shaoshu minzu (C)	ethnic minority, in contrast to da minzu (Han)
shehui daode (C)	social ethics
nu shengji (C)	Fatima Day
shengxun (C)	Hadith, saying and tradition of the Prophet
shetou (C)	also known as sheshou or xuedong, an elected mosque administrator, responsible for appointment of ahong, mosque administration, fund-raising, welfare activities, social networking
shexide (A)	martyr for Islam, shaheeda
shifu (C)	common form of address for ahong
shifu nainai (C)	term of address for older female j iaozhang/ahong
shimu (C)	ahong's wife; in Yunnan, a female teacher of Islam
shiniang (C)	or nu ahong; commonly indicates learning inferior to nu ahong; also, ahong's wife
shisan (C)	giving alms
shi weifan guofade (C)	in violation of state law
shuifang (C)	room for performing ablutions
shuncong (C)	submission
shuxiang zhijia (C)	a family of several generations of scholars
side (C)	Confucian code of feminine virtues
sishu (C)	old-style private (Confucian) school
song ahong (C/P)	seeing the ahong off after contract expiry
Sunujing (C)	(Han) text enlightening women in sexual matters
suole (A)	sura, chapter of the Koran
taiji (C)	idea of the Absolute in Chinese thought

tangping (C)		traditional water-kettle used in ablutions
tongyangxi (C)		infant daughter-in-law
tusheng fanke (C)		locally-born foreigner, term in use during Tang and Song times
waihun (C)		exogamy, Hui-Han marriage; as opposed to neihun, endogamy
waijiaoren (C)		colloquial expression for infidels, also referred to as kafeile, Kafir
wainanren (C)		literally, non-kin males; taboo on women's social intercourse with men other than husband and immediate family
waizaide zuoyong (C)		extrinsic factor/function
wazhibu (A)		prayer on Qurban and Ramadan, obligatory for male Muslims
weihun guafu (C)		'bride widow,-widowed before nikaha
weiji (C)		consolation
wei xinyang er xinjiao (C)		out of faith sprang yimani
wotou (C)		coarse-grained bread
wuchang (C)		euphemistic expression for death; literally, 'impermanence borrowed from ancient Han culture; see also guizhen
wu da gongke (C)		five basic religious duties incumbent on all Muslims
wudian (C)		five relationships defined by Liu Zhi as expressive of Islamic ethics, also known as wulun; unlike Confucian concept of wuchang, wudian privileges husband/wife union
wuji (C)		highest form of spirituality
wuli (A)		also known as woli; 'Friend of Allah', a Sufi term for saintly person able to work Miracles
wusilou (A)		separate room for individual to perform dajing or wusili
xiandai zhongguo funu (C)		secular (Maoist) construct of modern socialist womanhood
xianglao (C)		(1) an elected member of mosque administration; (2) colloquial term for Muslim, during Qing Dynasty known also as xiangmao
xianmao (C)		peach fairy's head-dress
xiannu (C)	t	celestial girl attendants
xianshu qiancheng (C)		good and virtuous, refined and pious; paradigmatic traditional female Muslim virtues

xiantao (C)	legendary fairy peach
xiantong (C)	celestial boy attendant
xianyi (C)	peach fairy's garments
xiao ahong (C/P)	informal address for a younger ahong, in rare use
xiaojing (C)	small or partial ritual ablution
xiaojing (C)	secondary Islamic texts, based on Arabic and Persian sources
xing (C)	concept of nurture in Chinese Islam, adapted from classical Chinese culture
xingbie huibi zhidu (C)	society based on sexual segregation
xinjiao/xinpai (C)	reformist Sunni school which entered China in 19th century, known as yihewani, or New New Teaching
xinixing (C)	preoccupied with trivial matter
xiuqi (C)	divorcing a wife
xiuti (C)	parts of the (female) worshippers' body which are considered shameful and thus in need of concealment, central to the Islamic concept of hijab
xuanxie (C)	(emotional) release, sublimation
yang (C)	in Chinese Islam: male, sacred and noble
yaodian (C)	small archway in the hall of worship pointing to the direction of Mecca; nusi have no yaodian, and the right direction is marked by a plain inscription or image of Mecca
yibulisi (A)	devil
yicong (C)	core ethical principle for Chinese Muslim women: obedience owed to husband
yidi (C)	yi, ancient term for minorities in Eastern parts of China; later all non-Han minorities and foreigners; di, minorities in Northern parts
yihewani(pai) (A/C)	reformist Islamic (school); see xinjiao
yilaixing (C)	dependency
yimamu (A)	known popularly as ahong (P) who leads worshippers in collective prayer
yimani (A)	faith belief in the existence of Allah, the angels, the Koran, the Prophet, the afterlife, and ordained life
yin (C)	in Chinese Islam: female, worldly and debased
yisilanjiao (A/C)	Islam
yixue (C)	charitable schools run by mosques or by individuals
yizhi shidai (C)	Bai Shouyi: 'period of consolidation' for

		Chinese Hui Muslims, 7th–14th c.
zang (C)		dirty, unclean; antonym of jie
zaxue (C)		miscellaneous texts collated by Chinese ahong for the rites of ablution, prayer and burial
zhangjiao (C)		also called zhangjiao ahong, main ahong in charge of mosque
zhenazi (C/A)		funeral rites
zhengxue (C)		to study in a proper Islamic spirit
Zhenzhu (C)		Allah, God
zhonga nuzi xuexiao (C)		girls' school with Chinese/Arabic curriculum
zhonga xuexiao (C)		school with Chinese/Arabic curriculum
Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Xiehui (C)		China Islamic Association
zhongyuan diqu (C)		Central China (narrowly defined): Henan; (in a wider sense includes) Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, Shandong
zhuma (A)		Friday, main prayer of week on Friday; although women are not required to join in the main prayer, also known as juli, increasingly Friday prayer day is viewed as important to women as it is to men
zizhiqu, zhou, xian, xiang (C)	州	autonomous region, prefecture, county, village, township
zongjiao shenfen (C)		religious identity
zongjiao tequan (C)		religious privileges
(Hui)zu (C)	()	(Hui) nationality
zuozhengyan (C)		Islamic credo, the vow of belief in Allah and His prophet which signals entry into Islamic faith

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